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A QUARTERLY OF NEW LITERATURE
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RALPH J. MILLS, JR.:

Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock

I

Poets in old age, feeling the steady approach of death, often tend to organize their attitudes, to seek out some representative symbols in which these may be embodied and preserved against the dissolution that awaits their own persons. In such efforts, they retrace the patterns of all their previous work, hoping to mount a worthy crown upon it, one which will suffuse each poem with a new light—an illumination wrenched from a struggle on the very threshold of annihilation. This action is, of course, restricted by the nature of individual cases and also by the disposition of the writer's mind toward the question of last things.

The concluding section of poems which Wallace Stevens appended to the collected edition of his work* contains, as Randall Jarrell has pointed out, some of his finest pieces. Almost without exception,

* All quotations of poetry, except for "The Sail of Ulysses," are from the *Collected Poems,* London, Faber, 1955. Quotations from *The Necessary Angel,* New York, Knopf, 1951, are indicated in the text by *N.A.* plus the page number; those from *Opus Posthumous,* New York, 1957, are also indicated in the text.

they are meditations on death or display premonitions of that event. The title given to the group, *The Rock,* figures in a number of the more important poems, and it becomes evident that this symbol is appointed a heavy burden. It is to give a final character to the whole body of Stevens' poetry, issuing and receiving meaning in a ceaseless flow of reciprocal relations with that body. Again, it is a place of spiritual entombment:

> There it was, word for word,
> The poem that took the place of a mountain.
>
> He breathed its oxygen,
> Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

The work itself resists the treachery of time. Death is time's instrument and draws things into its apparently endless round; from this enclosure there is no real departure. But in order to understand the total significance of the rock as it appears in these late poems, we must look at some of its previous manifestations and see how they contribute to that prominence.

The first notable appearance of the rock is in "How to Live. What to Do." from *Ideas of Order* (1936). In this poem, a "man and his companion" stop before "the heroic height" of the rock as it stands "impure" in a landscape under the pale light of the moon. The human pair, who may in part suggest Adam and Eve cast from the Garden, are explorers of the kind we often encounter among Stevens' array of *dramatis personae,* searching for a tenable view of the world:

> Coldly the wind fell upon them
> In many majesties of sound:
> They that had left the flame-freaked sun
> To seek a sun of fuller fire.

The wind's incessant and derelict motion, always a harbinger of flux and change for the poet, is the climate they have found between an old order sacrificed and a new order as yet unknown. But the rock remains the irreducible focus of the scene, cast in the remote glare of the imagination (the moon), and we are forced to accept it as *the* essential and imperfect fact:

> Instead there was this tufted rock
> Massively rising high and bare
> Beyond all trees, the ridges thrown
> Like giant arms among the clouds.

There was neither voice nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest.

The tone is one of religious awe, almost of veneration, before the austere and secret promise held by the rock. There is a mixture here also of the primitive man's pantheism and of the empiricist's recognition of the definite and physical, both circumscribed by the poet's mind. The first intimation we have of Stevens' idea of a *personal church* is contained in the imagery of these stanzas, along with the attendant god of the imagination and the absence of ritual or clergy.

Yet the rock cannot be bound to one meaning, and Stevens likes to clothe it in the garbs of the richest season as he does in "Credences of Summer." In this context, it turns to "the rock of summer," associated with the peak of earthly, physical existence, but once more, and from another angle, it is established as a form of objective certainty in the changing universe of Stevens' poetry:

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.
It rises from land and sea and covers them.
It is a mountain half way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes. But it is not

A hermit's truth nor symbol in hermitage.
It is the visible rock, the audible,
The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
On this present ground, the vividest repose,
Things certain sustaining us in certainty.

Distinguishing his symbol as real or factual in opposition to the philosopher's (the hermit's) occult conceptualization, the poet sees the rock as encompassing within itself the natural ("green") world grasped through the senses in an intuition of sheer physical being. The "immeasurable half'" of "placid air" contrasts with the shifting winds that destroy or alter things in so many of Stevens' poems and corresponds to the transparence in which perception and what is perceived are brought to fruitful completion. Without this transparent medium, of which the images of the "major," "glass," or "central" man are other and more concentrated instances, man falls short of his stature and fails to realize what is given to him—the possibilities of the created world. Outside of consciousness, the rock is his only

tangible form of assurance; it is the layer of the actual in which he has existence. Its materiality gives it a grounding in the midst of life, and Stevens insists that we, like his two travelers, start from there: "Reality is the beginning not the end," he says in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

II

Since we are involved with questions of death and eschatology in Stevens' poetry, it is necessary to examine his theology. To say that this poet is a naturalist, rejecting the accepted forms of Christianity or any other belief, is not to say that a certain type of theology is irrelevant here. It is true that from *Harmonium* on Stevens frequently treats supernatural religions with irony or otherwise indicates his distrust of them, sometimes setting as his frame of reference a world not unlike Nietzsche's one of eternal recurrence, as we discover in poems like "Description without Place," where that philosopher is considered. Often, as C. Roland Wagner has said, the influence of Bergson is discernible. At any rate, though Stevens satirizes self-righteous and stiff-necked piety or militant puritanism (see, for example, his treatment of Cotton Mather), he further reveals his own misconceptions of traditional Christianity. If I read him correctly, he views it as purely spiritual, as inimical to the creation. This notion seems to lie behind satires like "Cortège for Rosenbloom," too. However, orthodox Christian thought generally stresses the unity of the person rather than an unconditional division between body and soul which diminishes the worth of the former.

Whether we accept it or not, the announcement made in Nietzsche's *Gay Science* of the destruction of God has become a commonplace of our modern experience; it is the air we breathe. While Stevens is certainly aligned with this attitude, and has set the human as his boundary, he is, at the same time, unwilling to discard wholly the idea of God. There is no struggle in his verse with an older kind of orthodoxy which is cast off; what he accepts, he takes as simply the case. Christianity is observed in retrospect. In "The Men That Are Falling" from *The Man with the Blue Guitar,* he employs the character of a sleeper awakening to a vision in the darkness of his "catastrophic room," a metaphor for the mind. Dominated by the fierce moonlight of the imagination, he finds the pillow on which he gazes "More than sudar-

ium" and there confronts the tortured visage of a man who at once represents Christ and all other martyrs to an ideal cause. Though the intentions here are partially political, the value of the human redemption Stevens attaches to this sacrifice is not entirely clear. However, we do see that it belongs to this world, not to another. The agony and triumph are man's rather than God's, while the ideal that prompts these selfless actions is the noble vision of projected human "desire." We may be struck by the similarity in this to the *immanent transcendence* in the writings of Joyce or Yeats, a transfiguration achieved within the natural world yet raising the participants above the range of time and space. Stevens concludes: "This death was his belief though death is a stone./This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die." Death in the shape of the stone fixes a lasting silence within the physical order; beyond this is the "blank," as we learn in "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air." Taken as a confrontation of Christ, the poet concludes in a refusal to accept His divinity. None the less, he places important value on all such sacrificial acts, recognizing in them a pinnacle of heroic tragedy that yet belongs to the ordonnance of human imagination.

At the same time, the extent to which the significance of mortal gestures reaches is symbolic and adheres to what Stevens calls "supreme fictions." These ideas, by which we guide ourselves, lead him into the borders of mysticism. Furthermore, the attitude toward the universe implied above does not preclude the question of deity for him. Not only the poetry but the recently published "Adagia" in *Opus Posthumous* (1957) reveals a preoccupation with "God." But, in keeping with the limitations he has set, Stevens maintains his deity as indwelling; the universe, therefore, receives its structure from within itself. In one of the adages from the collection, he writes, "God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)" (p. 172). It is evident that the existence of Stevens' "God" depends completely on the existence of man and is, further, a creative force within him, or, as he says, "God and the imagination are one" (p. 178). The transfer of the generative power from the divine Logos of St. John's Prologue to the human faculties is accomplished in "Description without Place" and parallels the attitudes of "The Men That Are Falling." The world is created not out of nothing but, we might say, *in* depth or perspective, through the description of it:

Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be,

A text we should be born that we might read,
More explicit than the experience of the sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of the plentifullest John.

In that space, to use a convenient metaphor, between reality and the imagination, the flatly objective and the actively subjective, is created the "book" in which we should, Stevens tells us, seek our fullest being. For "the word is the making of the world," constructing out of the bare rudiments of our situation among objects a richer climate of habitation. The lonely pair of "How to Live. What to Do." must write upon the naked rock the meanings of which they are capable. With that act, they and the rock are drawn together and figured forth in a new identity.

In a certain respect, then, poetry is for Stevens something more than the written literature alone. It is a cast of mind, a way of looking that demands the "interdependence of reality and the imagination as equals" (*N.A.*, 27). This activity is not restricted, though craft may be; it is the exercise of what is humanly possible in our experience: "the true work of art, whatever it may be, is not the work of the individual artist. It is time and it is place as these perfect themselves" (*N.A.*, 139-140). Poetry, therefore, is involved in the very instant of our contact with the real and assumes the role of a new reality born of the fusion of the imagination and raw physical things: "The poem is the cry of its occasion,/Part of the res itself and not about it." God has become man's innate ability to renew the world and to live by the abundance arising from his intercourse with the blunt facts of material being. What Stevens calls "bare fact" is transmuted into the limitless prospects offered the mind by "analogy." The scope of life's potentiality is the

pursuit of our ideal images, fixed in these distances and glittering in the sunlit air. Of his thesis, the poems are "Pages of illustrations," attributing a human meaning to an otherwise indifferent, often hostile, world. Following this in detail, Stevens develops the persistent terms of his "revelation" from the elemental parts of the universe: moon, sun, stars, sea, stones, rivers, trees, and vegetation, wind and rain, the cycle of the seasons—all come through frequent use to operate as heavily weighted symbols. From such disciplined repetition, there arises a gospel of the natural man, as we gather in "Esthétique du Mal":

> And out of what one sees and hears and out
> Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
> So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
> As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
> With the metaphysical changes that occur,
> Merely in living as and where we live.

This kind of man charts his horizon from the roots of his participation in the physical, and what the expansive movements of the mind can make of that.

III

The two primary components of Stevens' poetic cosmos, the brute material fact and the imagination which fills it with meaning and value, are joined in the image of the rock. These interdependent parts are plainly visible in "Credences of Summer," where the physical and vegetative level is surmounted by the transparent glaze of imagination, bringing our focus to bear on a central point of things in a curious vision of celestial majesty. Here the eye, the chief organ of the imaginative faculty, projects its ideal representation and thus provides the harmonious conditions under which things become their utmost selves:

> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king.

The image of the gods is the unattainable center or idea from which everything radiates outward. This is the necessary element in what R. P. Blackmur calls Stevens' "platonism," for the remote and "inhuman" unify man's creation of the believable objects of his desires. But

it is the rock, not the imagined gods, that receives the illumination and seizes the religious sense with its brilliance and splendor—and that is what the poet intends. We find the same image recurring in very late pieces such as "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain" and "The Rock."

Before we examine the last uses of the rock, we should grasp the relationship to death which Stevens has assigned his symbol. In order to do this, we shall have to introduce another passage from an earlier poem; this is from "Esthétique du Mal," VII:

> How red the rose that is the soldier's wound,
> The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
> The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,
> The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.
>
> A mountain in which no ease is ever found,
> Unless indifference to deeper death
> Is ease, stands in the dark, a shadow's hill,
> And there the soldier of time has deathless rest.

The soldier, whose full title indicates the temporal order to which he belongs, becomes symbolic of all human life and the unavoidable *dénouement* that awaits it. Since it is really the dark or shadow side of the rock, the "mountain" serves as an image of the burial mound, of earthly solidity, and as the poet's version of the underworld. Though Stevens defines here a kind of survival, it is one which depends on life rather than any belief in God other than that already discussed. As a result, the levels of death intimated by the poem seem to identify "deeper death" with the doctrine of immortality held by Christians and unacceptable to the poet. The "concentric circles of shadows," derived from the traditional imagery of circles and rings associated with the idea of self-containment and eternity, take on a greater clarity as we proceed:

> The shadows of his fellows ring him round
> In the high night, the summer breathes for them
> Its fragrance, a heavy somnolence, and for him,
> For the soldier of time, it breathes a summer sleep . . .

This ceremony, so close to that of the funeral rituals of the seasonal gods, brings us back to "Sunday Morning" with its "ring of men" dancing and singing "on a summer morn" the glory of the sun, the joys of earthly existence. Stevens says of these celebrants that "They shall know well the heavenly fellowship/Of men that perish and of

summer morn." Evidently, then, the living and the dead are connected in some final and unbroken relation which escapes close definition, but which is deeply involved with their mystical bondage to the earth—the fecund and voluptuous queen of so many of the poems. The two circling groups of men in "Esthétique du Mal" and "Sunday Morning" are one and the same; we merely observe them from a different point of view in each poem. Life and death, as both Richard Ellmann and Northrop Frye have said of Stevens' personal eschatology, belong to one another and flow into one another. It is not surprising, therefore, to find him writing, "What a ghastly situation it would be if the world of the dead was actually different from the world of the living . . ." (*N.A.,* 76). In the reconstruction of the world, there can be no difference because the imagination is "the will of things."

The interpenetration of life and death takes place through the only agent possible for such metamorphoses in Stevens' scheme—the mind itself. In a poem called "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," we are offered a somewhat heavy prophecy of "the mythology of modern death" composed of a trio of figures. There are "two brothers" in this pantheon, one is "high sleep," the other, "high peace." They share the company of that woman, the queen of many disguises, who is here "the mother of us all,/The earthly mother and the mother of/The dead." The apparitions, like the gods before them, receive their actuality as projections, through the imagination, of human wishes. Under their aegis, death brings no radical alteration to the essential nature of man's condition; instead, there is just endless repose. If Yeats sometimes thought that man created all he knew and experienced, Stevens can play him a consistently close second:

> Compounded and compounded, life by life,
> These are death's own supremest images,
> The pure perfections of parental space,
>
> The children of a desire that is the will,
> Even of death, the beings of the mind
> In the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare . . .
>
> It is a child that sings itself to sleep,
> The mind, among the creatures that it makes,
> The people, those by which it lives and dies.

The multiple voices of the "Interior Paramour" return us to the problems attendant on the poet's division between reality and the imagina-

tion, but these, we may add, are best visualized, as life and death are, in terms of circles.

Reality, or the physical, factual world, is a closed system in Stevens' cosmology, conditioned by "Generations of the imagination" and bounded by the seasonal periods whose importance in the poetry we have already mentioned. In "The Auroras of Autumn," I, the serpent, we gather, marks a scale of meaning for this world along his length from head to tail, "the master of the maze/Of body and air and forms and images." And his performance is a repetition of that archetypal pursuit of himself that fixes polarities of the real and the unreal: "This is form gulping after formlessness." We have the circle again. Imposed on brute reality, the imagination, though limited in the individual by the span of human existence, perpetually extends its range of meaning, as we have said previously, upon what is otherwise a "basic slate." To account for the origins and goals of being, the imagination produces figurations of its own. Through these, the reality which is man's foundation suffers a change that leaves him in control by the domination of his images. In time, these images will topple and new ones will then be forthcoming. The mind's labors swell, drawn out by what they must encompass when there is no other support. It is little wonder that Stevens deified this faculty. We discover something of the fullness and stature expected of such work in a late poem, "The Sail of Ulysses," published in *Opus Posthumous* (p. 102):

> His mind presents the world
> And in his mind the world revolves.
> The revolutions through day and night,
> Through wild spaces of other suns and moons,
> Round summer and angular winter and winds,
> Are matched by other revolutions
> In which the world goes round and round
> In the crystal atmospheres of the mind,
> Light's comedies, dark's tragedies,
> Like things produced by a climate, the world
> Goes round in the climates of the mind
> And bears its floraisons of imagery.

The mind, then, is also a circle, for it fits itself to the conditions of this cyclical whole, which is, in effect, *its* territory. Thus Stevens says elsewhere, "We live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there . . ." (*N.A.*, 65).

The attainment of true centrality, both necessary and desirable in

this arrangement of things, is connected with death and the rock in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," III, and in "Things of August," IX, we learn that it is the place from which meanings are perceived, and in the perceiving made:

> A text of intelligent men
> At the centre of the unintelligible,
> As in a hermitage, for us to think,
> Writing and reading the rigid inscription.

Earth itself affords the "text" of secular revelation, preserving tight order against chaos. Drawing in more closely, "The Hermitage at the Center" and "The World as Meditation" from *The Rock* show the end and the beginning as one, caught up in the figure of "the desired," the earth queen, whose youthful sensuousness promises to vanquish the apparent disorder of age. Likewise, the "Irish Cliffs of Moher" stand as the mythical ground of existence rather than mere landscape. The elements of which they are composed and the values associated with them put these cliffs in the line of the rock's appearances:

> This is my father or, maybe
> It is as he was,
> A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth
> And sea and air.

This is the farthest backward reach of Stevens' form of genesis, the stony base permeated by the psyche's images. To the genealogy of the fathers everything will be returned, for, as he says in another poem, "The spirit comes from the body of the world." The "center" towards which life always moves and whence it reappears is at the heart of all these circles and is an integral part of them. Their unity is that imagined embrace of Penelope and the voyager Ulysses, a "form of fire," never fully achieved, yet forever coming nearer and nearer in "The World as Meditation." The closing of the ring brings about a wholeness that embodies life and death, imagination and reality, the animate and the inanimate. Stevens' belief "beyond belief," his vision of the eternal, is the persistence of this totality.

IV

The space around which the serpent coils and which the closed circle knits is the periphery of the rock, and in the poem of that title Stevens makes an effort to give a final explanation to his attitudes. There are three sections: the first begins the course of meditations

from an autobiographical foundation; the second discloses the rock itself and the meanings that it brings together; the concluding portion once again places the rock in relation to death (and here we should perhaps think of Stevens' own, so closely following) which leads the poem back to the point where it began, only on a new level.

The opening section, "Seventy Years Later," has that peculiar flavor, almost a bitterness, of old age as it examines a past that no longer appears to have any ties with the present person and his condition. Indeed, the poet gazes at this earlier self in some astonishment and disbelief; they hardly seem to belong to one another, or want to:

> It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
> Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
> By our own motions in a freedom of air.

With lines of a defiant beauty, Stevens claims that love and human relationships, at this remove in time, are grotesque: "an embrace between one desperate clod / And another . . ." But this "queer assertion of humanity," he realizes, is a necessary block against "nothingness," and it becomes at least "an impermanence / In its permanent cold." The *barren* rock itself is the substance of this negation, though human assertions come to bear the "green leaves" upon it. It stands alone, as we first saw it in "How to Live. What to Do.," an inhuman universe, and it remains meaningless, a raw fact, without the invasion of the mind and senses. The responsibility for bringing about that change lies with the lonely pair of the early poem. The gates of Eden have opened and, for Stevens, God is gone; divinity is man's burden now and the world his task. In this coming forth, there is a spring birth that is at once both purge and blossom: "the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned, / Exclaiming bright sight . . ." Within the orbit of the eye, the rock is made over, a rock upon a rock, looming now as the essential ground on which the "incessant being alive" flourishes.

Whether Stevens intended it or not, the appropriation of the image of the rock is in keeping with his general adoption of Biblical vocabulary for secular purposes. The rock is, of course, for the Christian associated with the origins of the Church in Christ's delegation of spiritual authority to Peter; from this there has developed an identification of the symbol of the rock with the Church. We have already pointed to several other uses Stevens has made of orthodox religious terminology and concepts. Inseparable from this practice, the ideas of

redemption and reconstruction—the creation of unified being—are then allied with the harmonious function of the rock in man's attachment to it. The blossoms of green are insufficient by themselves, we are told in part II, "The Poem as Icon," and man must be "cured" or transformed, that is, identified with the "fiction of the leaves" he has made. Stevens' narcissism is revealed here, not as egoism or vanity but as the contemplation of the projected images in which we live. We might think of a set of mirrors (imagination and reality) facing each other, which in-between make a habitable world out of their compounded reflections—everything is part of everything else. The rock is the space of this world, and the wholeness which it symbolizes contains sacramental qualities for the poet. These are bodied forth in the images of the leaves to suggest a peculiar form of sanctification: "the figuration of blessedness, / And the icon is the man." In the lines that follow, three successive seasons become the property of the rock, and the complete unity is seen against the backdrop of nothingness, involving winter, which is omitted from this ideal seasonal pattern:

> The pearled chaplet of spring,
> The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood,
>
> Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.
> These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.
> These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves,
>
> In the predicate that there is nothing else.

Stevens means, I think, that we should take "cure" in its sense of spiritual charge or curacy, as well as a remedy. Despite his naturalism, he is attempting to represent through the image of the rock a religious formulation to replace the Christian view of life, which, he feels, belongs to the past. The frequent conversion of the language of the Gospels we have previously remarked can only be understood in the light of some such end. But the formulation brought about must be of a kind that disavows doctrine or creed and, in the poet's scheme of historical relativism, can be fitted to any change—in fact, partakes of it.

At this point, I think we may, borrowing from Richard Ellmann, speak of Stevens' personal "church of the imagination," mentioned in passing at the outset of the essay. By "church" I mean a composite of sacred attributes harbored by the rock and held within the compass of the mind. These include, most broadly, the life of the natural man and the operation of the imagination therein. As such, it is, as we

said before, a closed system, though an extensive one. Stevens discovers religiousness there in the desired fruition of existence:

> In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the rock,
> Of such mixed motion and such imagery
> That its barrenness becomes a thousand things
>
> And so exists no more.

In one of the "Adagia" from *Opus Posthumous,* he writes, "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (p. 158). Thus the distinctive lines of aesthetics and theology merge into this church of the solitary imagination, a bulwark thrown up at the edge of an abyss. In one respect or another, the same tendency is visible in writers like Yeats and Rilke, in the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake.* The modern poet, frequently divorced from a stable religious faith or communal vision, is not only faced with the job of creating the reality of his art but finds himself inclined by the temptations of uncertainty to make of his art the *only* reality—an imagined one. If this is his choice, the artist becomes, sooner or later, the inhabitant of his work. Because life and the "poem" are interchangeable within the boundaries of the rock, the poet endows the latter with the compressed, incipient significance of a permanent memorial—the perpetually uttered song that renews itself in time. In "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," the rock appears as the final resting place, where the poet merges into his work and discovers there a substitute for the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the person. Art is the vessel of the purified, transfigured essential self. Since the rock belongs to time, death merely replaces one relationship with the earth for another, more inexplicable one.

Parallel with this, Stevens locates Heaven and Hell, in "Esthétique du Mal," as integral areas of the mind developed from man's experience of the world rather than anything exterior to it. The rock is, at last, "the gray particular of man's life" and "The stone from which he rises up—and—ho, / The step to the bleaker depths of his descents . . ." These are first and final things, and in "The Rock" the encroachment of death stirs the memory to recount the catalogue, the book of earth well-loved:

> The starting point of the human and the end,
> That in which space itself is contained, the gate
> To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

> By day, night and that which night illumines,
> Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
> Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep.

These stanzas draw round the complete ring of existence as Stevens envisages its certainty, fortified by the prevailing substance of the physical and by the poem played upon it through a lifetime and remaining after death. Out of this durable identification, the imagination proffers its concluding gesture in the form of a chapel rising out of the decay of an aged cathedral, as we find in "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside":

> Its chapel rises from Terre Ensevelie,
> An ember yes among its cindery noes,
> His own: a chapel of breath, an appearance made
> For a sign of meaning in the meaningless . . .

This breath is the warmth of life and the action of the spirit. Stevens' affirmation is built into the structure of the chapel where he is both priest and worshipper. Set in the very teeth of ruinous time, it is shelter from it knows not what.

While Stevens admits that "The imagination is able to manipulate nature . . . but it is not able to create a wholly new nature" (*N.A.,* 74), we have seen what that manipulation entails. W. H. Auden, in a recent professorial address at Oxford on Robert Frost, prefaced his discussion by adapting two figures from *The Tempest* as metaphors for leading types of poetry, or perhaps we should say poetic minds. These were, he said, "Ariel-dominated" and "Prospero-dominated." The latter category, in which he placed Frost, is representative of the search for wisdom; the former, including Rimbaud and Mallarmé, seeks the earthly paradise. There is little doubt, I think, that Stevens moves with Ariel. Poets in his path hunger after that transformation which will bring a lost history full circle and restore to man the image and nature from which he once defected. Rilke's angels and Stevens' imagination are burdened with these crosses, however they try to twist away. In an age like ours, such visions are doomed to heroic isolation, and poets must pursue them into the dark. Rejecting belief, they have still retained an image of man's destiny from wreckage and abandonment. Stevens never withdrew his confidence from the idea of human regeneration, from the Just City, and from the earth in all its flower: each thing rooted in every other and opened deeply to the sky—ripeness as it was meant to be.

THOMAS GALLAGHER:

Alone with a Name

Mike took no notice of the vestibule until he saw the name, Mr. & Mrs. Clifford Reardon, and rang the bell. Then the oval-framed inner door, the ornate woodwork and the lion-headed doorknob became things to see, like birthmarks noticed for the first time after years of friendship. Mike recalled Cliff saying that he had met Jan while sleighing in Prospect Park—and on the same Flexible Flyer that Oona and Moira used now. Cliff's parents still lived and would no doubt die in this Park Slope section, along with all the other Irish-Catholic holdouts against the Puerto Ricans.

There was no answering buzz and the doorknob, when he tried it, turned round and round with no effect whatever on the latch, which turned out to be missing anyhow. He pushed in and started up a surprisingly ample staircase whose carpeted creaks and stained-glass hues reminded him of watch chains, derby hats and darkly worsted men with set ideas. The lighting fixtures had originally been installed for gas and now the same tulip-shaped globes covered low-watt bulbs that seemed themselves to flicker. Mike wondered whether anyone else in the building had children, the place looked so mortified and sorry, like a bar after the 12:30 Mass on Sunday. He could not imagine kids running up these stairs with the fresh air in their hair and sweaters and under their flaring woolen skirts. It was a grandparent house; the children had married and bought homes in Westbury and Manhasset to raise their own families and turn Republican in.

On the top landing (Cliff had said top floor, front) he knocked and then had to knock again. This door too, like those on the other landings, had a rectangle of clouded stippled glass, as in an office building. Only there were no names in gold leaf and the effect was different anyway—eccentric, especially up here, where a huge skylight sort of turned the whole place inside out.

Damn it, he thought. For when he knocked again, harder this time, the glass shook (it was loose at the bottom) and the door itself began to open. Just like the crazy bastard's Pontiac. He called, pushed the door all the way, and suddenly stopped.

Cliff, fully clothed in a dark brown suit, was face downward on the floor. His hands, the palms against the wood, and feet, turned outward, were as far from the torso as they could go. There was something hopeless and long since defeated about the position and as Mike rushed in, whispering, not shouting, "Cliff! Cliff!" he instinctively looked for blood and felt at once the anxiety of loss and a certain giddy, prepared-for relief, as from the recovery of something unspecified and only sensed but nevertheless profound. Even as he bent down and cautiously touched the body on the shoulder, his mind ran ahead to the funeral parlor, to Cliff's mother and father and Jan and the Irish relatives weeping amidst the wreaths and bleeding hearts and rosy crosses. He imagined the quick runs to the bar around the corner with Cliff's uncles, and gave a thought to the fact that he, being Cliff's best friend, would no doubt be asked to sit with the immediate family in the first, or at least, second, car. Even when he caught Cliff's moany snore and smelled the gin rising with the steamy warmth from the head and shoulders, the funereal tenderness lingered—not, he hurriedly told himself, for Cliff's death, but for the kind of love that his death would have made possible.

"Come on, up. Up!" He shook him by the shoulder and turned him over on his back, from which position Cliff, with hitches and clutters in his breathing, threw a wild roundhouse in his sleep. Mike easily pulled back out of reach but went back to shaking him again. For one thing he did not want to go too far into the apartment, or intentionally observe too much of it, without Cliff's knowledge. Cliff and Jan had just moved back from Manhattan and one of Cliff's quirks was that he always wanted to be the link between a thing of his and a friend of his. In the other apartment he had made it plain, though never in so many words, that he did not like friends going to the refrigerator even for a tray of ice. A half-eaten chicken leg, a bone from an old roast, a mildewed frankfurter or a smelly piece of Liederkranz—all were like letters addressed to him that friends, however close, had no business reading. He might put out some cold cuts for you, let you read a paragraph or two, but you were not to get thick with anything on your own. He had to be the link, the flour in the sauce.

Mike had sat down and was leaning forward, sort of unemployed, with his elbows on his knees. The windows were closed and the smell of gin, sweat and stale cigarettes webbed the air and made it hard to breathe. It was a smell that said nothing new about Cliff

or their friendship either: Columbia University before the war, civilians with the U.S. Army Engineers in Iran, the fo'c'sles of merchant ships—heat, mosquitoes, malaria, dysentery; battered Mediterranean ports and Arab, French and Italian whores. They were old reminders; they took no effort and gave no pleasure.

Then very quietly, like a man making a mistake, Cliff woke up. He opened his eyes, more seen than seeing without his glasses, and gave Mike a grunt. It was obvious that he knew where he was, why Mike was here, approximately what time it was, and so on. What wasn't obvious was why the mere awareness of such things should seem almost too much for him. Finally, with an effort, he reached for his dark-rimmed glasses on the floor beside him and slipped them on, and his eyes gathered steerageway once more. He was still on the floor, still only vaguely sober, but now, tucking the glasses up against the bridge of his nose, he looked more like himself than ever; the black widow's peak was part of his forehead again.

"Was the door open? I just made it last night."

But he didn't want an answer and, struggling to his feet (he was still quite drunk), went to a bay of tall and narrow windows at the front of the room, released one shade after another and opened every window wide. Long blocks of light shot into the room, followed by waves of air that smelled refreshingly of the park across the street. It had rained but now it was sunny and the air was temporarily free of soot.

"You should have seen these window frames two weeks ago," he said, running his hand along a vertical strip and cocking his head to one side. "The *paint,* I mean. You've seen paint on ships." He glanced over his shoulder but it was unnecessary; Mike had already started over. "Look," he said, and held up his hands. There were discolorations in the palms where blisters had been. He held them up a long time, in silence and with the grim suggestion on his face—it was just his way of telling a story—that what had happened to them was Mike's fault. "No paint remover, no scraping machine, no blowtorch. I scraped them by hand right down to the original wood."

"Why no paint remover?"

"Messy—ruin your floor." He made a disgusted face that did away with the need for reasons. This was an apartment in the old neighborhood and so even the fact that he could have afforded the best professional painters was beside the point. "I wanted them done—you know."

"Well, you got them white all right." Mike ran a finger over the sill. "Even—nice."

"Smooth as a baby's ass." His eyes kept following Mike's finger. "What do you think I should do with the floors?"

Mike turned from the window and began stepping around, hopscotch fashion, from one square of parquet to another. Ordinarily Cliff would have said, What the hell do you think you're doing? but now he waited patiently for Mike to "test" it. The apartment was still too obviously important to Cliff; it wasn't digested in the friendship yet.

"Sand them with a sanding machine," Mike said. "Then—ever hear of Fabulon? . . ."

They were both standing in wide stances, looking down at the floor and making trite remarks like, "Beautiful parquet, all right," "Too good to cover with a rug," and so on, when Cliff leaned out one of the windows, far out over the park, and took it in with his eyes and nose and, as the wind found him, his skin too. He had a wonderful love for that park; his boyhood, youth, the games and sleigh rides and first girl kisses in the snow were all there hidden in the flickering blue-green leaves with the infant who had not even thought of himself as "Cliff"—a person alone with a name. Mike could see the slant of his jaw and the steady unblinking eye through another window and for a moment it was hard not to believe that the park had its own idea of itself and that that idea was entering Cliff's mind just as surely as Cliff's idea of it was forming. That's it, Cliff, that's it, he wanted to say. For the trees and grass and softly rolling hills were almost alarming in the way they brought back the very unhampered love he'd felt while rushing into the apartment thinking Cliff was dead.

"No, I like the place, Cliff," he said as the other pulled back in. "You put in some more furniture—Is the sofa new?"

"*Brand* new. Six hundred."

"You get curtains up—" Mike went on.

Cliff swung belligerently about; he was happy and there was none of the feeling now that Mike's being here needed care. "God damn it, the curtains and blinds and things are up to Jan."

"Where is she, anyway?"

"Church with the kids. No—she would have given me a boot on the way out. She goes to church again, though, you know. Has to. The kids go to parochial."

Just then a door within the apartment slammed and Cliff's two daughters came running in, Oona, the blonde, waving a dirty cowboy handkerchief of an American flag, and Moira, the brunette and younger, trying in vain to snatch it from her. The flag was tattered, obviously from earlier struggles between the girls.

"Careful of the flag, children, careful of the flag," Cliff said. "It's Sunday." He had sat down on a Mexican child's chair (there was very little furniture in the room) and with his head between his knees was taking off his shoes. The girls were ten and eight—beautiful, shy, and with that pale, subdued innocence that so often goes with being secluded from the world with heavy-drinking parents. They stopped with the flag almost immediately.

"Where's your mother?" Cliff said.

"Getting ready." They said it in almost perfect unison. "We're receiving."

When Jan appeared, in high heels, gloves, hat and blue voile dress, it was like Easter coming in. She greeted Mike but made her husband the more conspicuous by her steadfast presumption of his absence. She was not angry, not importantly at any rate, for when she finally did glance at him and say, simply, "The check," her harsh familiarity was like the habit of love itself. She never used that clipped Brooklynese with anyone but Cliff and it gave their marriage, in the presence of friends, a certain quality of truth. She was a pale wraith of a girl who spoke very rapidly and drank beer and scotch from morning till night without gaining an ounce. There was something poignantly disunited about her; she was fragile, fastidious and even prudish to a degree that fifty years ago would have suggested a convent education, and at the same time toughly modern, a heavy drinker conversant with sordidness in marriage, foul language, and that terrible afternoon loneliness that afflicts wives who are neither sure of themselves nor sure they're loved—a kind of Victorian holding more and more rigidly on to what few niceties were left. As a child she had had several operations on her tear ducts, with the result that they were now almost completely out of control. She cried at football games, in restaurants, at the end of parties and in the street, and often, but not always, for reasons too capricious for friends to guard against. The only two necessary conditions seemed to be liquor and the presence of her husband, so that when "the barometer was low and steady," as one friend put it, there was nothing to do but prepare for rain.

"Oona, you and Moira go downstairs and wait for me," she said to the girls, and then, harshly again to her husband: "Barbecued chicken or frozen shrimp?"

"Ask Mike."

"Don't ask me. I won't be here that long."

"Come on," Cliff said. "I thought we were going to hit a few golf balls in the park? They just cut the grass."

He had got up in his stocking feet and was going through his jacket pockets for his checkbook and pen. The sense of being home, planted, the stomping head of a family, came clearly from all his movements now. He might have been "playing house," he looked that boyish and potentially responsible. And yet his temples were already gray and the smell of gin was all around him.

"Write out the check, will you?" Jan said. She finally went up, got the checkbook from his pocket for him, and, in that ineffectual way women have who have never done housework or been to girl scout camp, gave him a push toward the sofa.

But Cliff had no sooner sat down and leaned over the coffee table to write than he stopped and looked up again. "How long has it been since we've lived in this neighborhood, Jan?" He seemed not to notice her impatience. "Let's see. Class of '41. That means I moved into the dorms in '37. You realize that? Twenty years." He turned from one to the other, as if giving them both a chance to inspect his face for signs of age. He looked only half serious, but then out of the apparent lightness of mood he said, "It seems impossible. All I've done is not died."

"Cliff, will you write out the check?"

"Until a moment ago (wait, Jan, this is important), I'd completely forgotten that we made our first Holy Communion together. Then the kids ran in and I was taking off my shoes, and every single detail . . . . You had that straw hat on with the ribbon down the back, remember? And when I pulled at it . . . " He shook his head, smiling to himself at the thought. " 'The fiery gravity of youth at the beginning of the task of life—the beginning of beliefs and hopes.' Conrad."

"I wouldn't *have* to buy Sunday dinner in delicatessens if you ever came home."

"You were about to say something nice. Why didn't you?"

"Write. Will you write?"

He leaned over, wrote out the date, and, just as Jan began to breathe more easily, looked up again. "Are you receiving too?"

If it had meant a hundred dollars to him not to look up and ask another question, he would still have looked up and asked one. He couldn't help himself. Offering the other person a tomato, a pear, a bunch of grapes—anything but the apple that had been specifically asked for—had become almost chronic with him. Ever since his success on Wall Street had become assured and money had ceased to be a problem (he carried it loose in his trousers pockets now where it was easy to get at), he'd begun listening to people with his middle ear and then going straight to the heart of another matter entirely.

"Very funny," Jan was saying.

"I think you ought to think about it, Jan. Seriously. Now that the children are going to parochial and all."

"We could both do a little thinking about that."

Cliff nodded. He was musing now; the check was completely forgotten. "When I woke up this morning, I remember it clearly now, I opened my eyes and gave depression and truth a chance at me. This could be different, I thought. It could be somewhere else. Mike here could be some friend that I don't have from the Bronx. Don't laugh, Mike, I'm serious. It was as if I were at a local stop and an express had just raced by. The past had become the future and I was—unaltered in between. I didn't realize it had been twenty years, Jan, did you?"

His stomping masculine happiness of a moment ago seemed really to have dissipated now, or rather, to have brought on this new mood with which he did not want to be alone. And though it was still hard to take him seriously—and Jan showed how prepared she was not to—there *was* something about the way he kept touching upon truth and then backtracking from it, as though he were after what he was afraid to find, that made each new time he acted this way almost believable but not quite.

In a voice that was not like the same voice at all (someone might have turned on the radio), he added . . . "'It is utter/ Terror and loneliness/ That drives a man to address the/ Void as "Thou."' Edna St. Vincent Millay."

"Is this all for Mike, then?" Jan said, and though her tear ducts were acting up again, she seemed to be clinging to her antagonism—using it as one might one's common sense. "This show about receiving? Telling me to think about it?"

"It's *for* all of us, and it isn't a show. I don't know what you mean."

"You're not sucking me in."

"What an expression. I don't understand you any more, Jan. Really. The way you *pounce* on every chance you get to doubt me. I wake up this morning on the floor here, feel lousy and guilty about it, and then without notice, like the grace of God butterflying down . . ."

"Now cut it out! Stop it! I know damn well . . ." For years Jan had claimed that a quote, any quote, no matter how apt, was a tip-off that the "mouthpiece," as she sometimes called her husband, was up to something. Her antagonism to such language in speech had grown, indeed, to the point where Cliff, when he was sober at least, positively refrained from using it in her presence, with the result that poetry, aphorism and epigram had become permanently associated in her mind with drunkenness. On the deeper side was the fact that Cliff's ability to fortify and enhance conversation with this booty from the New York Public Library (he read pounds of books a week) had at first enchanted her. It was only after marriage, after the champagne glasses had been chipped and broken and been replaced by empty peanut-butter jars, after the cigarette burns began to appear on the pine dining room set and the sterling began to be used for scrambling eggs and stirring the lumps out of condensed soup, after Cliff had begun to fart in his sleep and use foul language in front of the children, that she came to the conviction that, no matter how beautiful a quote was in or of itself, it became worthless if not downright unclean on the lips of her husband. When Cliff tried to point out that what she was objecting to was "the very range of his emotional response," she made a sound, "Phew!" that was now almost automatic whenever her revulsion proved too much for her.

"You know *what* damn well?" Cliff was saying.

"That you're just trying to work us up. Get something going. *You're* still drunk, so last night isn't over yet."

"Didn't you hear what I just *said*?"

"You're still drunk. Weird. Last night isn't over yet."

"Damn it, now, wait a minute," Mike said. "Are we serious or aren't we?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Cliff said. "Western Union here comes in," he indicated Jan, "sings 'Happy Birthday to you,' and we all forget what we're talking about." He swung back to Jan. "What *is* this discontinuity between one day and another all of a sudden?"

But Mike saw that it was already too late and that everything

was going to be different now from what Cliff had intended as recently as two minutes ago. Western Union might just as well have come in, and with momentous news at that, for all the chance there was now of getting Cliff back on the original track.

"The way I look at it," he was saying to Jan, "today is yesterday wearing a fake mustache. It's as simple as that. And I don't mean by that that today is phony. On the contrary, to demand a real mustache, and tomorrow maybe even a real beard, when there just isn't time overnight to grow either one . . . I mean it, Jan. No kidding. 'To resist nonbeing by reducing being is the sign of a neurotic character.' Paul Tillich."

"Fish no bite. Hemingway."

Cliff suddenly gave up trying and laughed. But good-humoredly, no hard feelings. "Then Santiago, he change bait."

What struck Mike for perhaps the thousandth time was Cliff's *alacrity* to act as if he had been kidding all along. Jan was mistaken about that, and nothing was more like Cliff than to allow that mistake to pass now as the real and final truth. "Why don't you write out the check and get it over with?" he said, and turned to Jan. "What kind of curtains you planning to put up?"

They turned toward the bay of windows to exchange a few remarks, while Cliff, breaking out with "Danny Boy," proceeded once more to write out the check. Danny Boy was "his" song, and he only sang it when he had, as he did now, his listeners' attention.

They gave him ample time to write out the check and were just about to turn back, in about the middle of the song, when the singing stopped and Cliff jumped up with a long, violent string of oaths. The pen was still in his hand, dart-like, when they swung about, and he was looking down at a huge inkstain on the six-hundred-dollar sofa they had just bought.

Jan looked as people do when they are slapped hard across the face. She couldn't speak. The stain looked so unnecessarily large and complicated—more like a Rorschach blot than an accident. She rushed over. "What did you do? How did it happen?"

"What's the *difference* how it happened? It happened, that's all. It happened."

"It'll never come out. Never."

"Now wait, before you lose your head again . . ."

"How did it happen? I want to know how it happened!"

"Why? Will knowing remove it?"

"I want to know!"

"You want to know. All right. Very simple. I forgot that it was the kind of pen you pump to fill, that's all. I wrote out the check and was closing it, like this—"

"What are you doing? What are you doing?" Jan shrieked.

"*Doing?*" Cliff said, "*doing?*" apparently unaware that he had sent another spurt all over the other cushion. "Heads or tails, for goodness' sake?"

"You fool, you fool!" There were tears in her voice and in her eyes. Holy Communion was not for her, and neither was beautiful furniture.

Cliff looked down at what he'd done and for a moment Mike was certain that the second spurt had been on purpose, since the sofa was ruined anyway. Cliff's eyes seemed so slyly, and at the same time so apprehensively, to be watching the stain spread, out of their corners at it were, or from behind the draperies of some nightmare or something. Indeed, it was this blurred and fractured vision that gave all his ventures, whether business, romantic, or social, their almost Ben Turpin indirection and made them so successful: no norm ever tripped him up. He looked serious now, for instance, deeply serious, but what about? "You *had* to know how it happened, didn't you?" he said, with such bitterness that Mike was convinced that it *was* a joke. He tried to catch Cliff's eye, but Cliff refused to look at him. All effort now was directed toward Jan, but not actually toward her even. Toward winning time, it almost seemed, from time itself.

"I'm sorry, Jan," he said. "I'm behaving like a fool. I know I am and yet I go right on as though I didn't know—until, believe me, I don't know. Can you understand that? How I can know I'm being a fool and at the same time think, 'Maybe I'm not one, maybe they are'? I become a sincere fool and I'm no longer showing off. I say to myself 'Who knows?' and then it's too late. I'm a complete fool then and there's a sense of uncertainty about it that makes the whole thing strange and wonderful, as if foolishness were the wisest thing about me after all. Can you understand that, Jan? When I woke up this morning . . ."

"Shut up about when you woke up this morning."

"I was just going to say that I foresaw this happening. Not ink stains on the sofa, exactly, but something big. *Good* and big. 'Today's the day,' I thought after the lousy feeling wore off. 'Can't lose.' And your mentioning that about your receiving again is right down the

same alley. I'm mixing my metaphors but I'm sincere. I have a feeling that everything *is* going to work out, and these ink stains are merely the opening skirmishes . . ."

"You *are* low, aren't you? The way you squirm out of the very things you'd hold anybody else to. Just wait'll you see the bill."

"Forget about the sofa for a minute, will you?" He touched the second stain with his finger, then looked at the finger, though there was plenty of ink on his hand from the pen already. "It'll be all right."

"I know it will. There'll be an upholsterer here tomorrow. The most expensive I can find."

"Jan, I said it would be all right."

"You said."

"Yes, Jan. *I* said." A new note had come into his voice that made them both look up. He was slightly pompous now, a man both easily hurt and quickly vindictive. It was as if amnesia, the swirling vestiges of last night's alcohol, had cut him off from what was appropriate not only to the occasion but to his own nature. From looking at him it was impossible to tell what he was after, whether he was suffering from something real or merely having fun. In all likelihood he didn't know himself. "I think I deserve your . . . that is, if words still have meaning."

"You're drunk. Stop it!"

"I am not drunk and those words were not put in the ceremony for nothing."

"Now I've had enough!"

" 'Honor and Obey,' remember? Another was 'Cherish.' "

"You want me to stop taking the girls to church, is that it? Does it bother you that much? Is that why you wouldn't sign the check?"

"I'm glad that slipped, Jan, and I forgive you for it. No, it doesn't bother me, and it isn't why I wouldn't sign the check. On the contrary, your taking the girls to church is what brought the whole thing up. Maybe I am drunk, I don't know. But these stains here—did you think, does anyone ever think any more, of higher powers?"

"You're no good. You're just no good!"

"No, no, no, no, no. Listen! Something happens and right away people say, 'Get the police,' 'Call a doctor,' 'Hand me the Flit,' and so on. But does anyone ever, any more . . ." he glanced upward. "I hesitate to speak plainly."

Mike grabbed the check (Cliff had signed it—fifty dollars), put it in Jan's pocketbook, and began trying to lead her to the door. But something, perhaps the way his arm suggested kindness or warmth, started her back at Cliff.

"In front of your friend, you're *big,* aren't you?"

"Listen to me, Jan, listen! Will you, for once? I am far from being a good Christian, but I am not quite an unbeliever either. It's because you *are* taking the girls to church, because you look so nice and it's so sunny out and I'm going to hit a few golf balls with Mike in the park that I thought . . . for instance, let me ask you this. If you saw one of the kids struck by the car, wouldn't 'God' be one of the first words on your lips? Well, why now, I said to myself after I spilled the ink a second time and you called me a fool—and as I say, it was *because* you were going to church—should we rush like mad for the Renuzit? I said before that all I've done so far is not died, and it's true. All right, so I was happy for a few minutes last night at Garrity's. Gilliam stole second and Hodges hit him home. But when I woke up this morning nothing was happening and so nothing *had* happened. Can you understand that? I began looking around, measuring today against the failure of last night. It's what I always do, because everything finished is a failure with me, you know that, and everything in the past is finished. That's my habitual and awful penance, starting out with nothing each time. In fact, when you said that before about last night not being over yet, I jumped because I didn't think you knew about the separation between the days." Jan had begun silently to cry. "And whether a prayer'll work is beside the point. I was thinking of the piquancy of believing that it might. That's what's missing, the piquancy. I'm slipping into cowardice again, Mike would say, and maybe I am, I don't know. The point I'm trying to make is, I don't *care* whether a prayer'll do the trick. Will you join me in one?"

Jan seemed on the verge of becoming someone else. Cliff had tricked her again—started with "sincerity," sucked her in, and then ridiculed her for *being* sucked in. It was as if he had lured her into some weird religious fun house: this crucifix squirted water at you, this missal contained Mickey Spillane, this pew had sliding seats. And all the while Cliff's sincere, straightforward expression remained beyond her, beyond reproach. It was incredible, that expression, whatever it meant.

"Don't you know the difference yourself?" Mike said. "In your

own *mind* even, between what you mean and don't mean?"

But Jan had literally started running into the rear of the apartment and Cliff had started after her. At the head of the hallway he stopped, however, and with unbelievable vehemence began shouting after her.

"Go ahead, leave!" He was a completely "sincere" fool now. "But where will you spend eternity? Those words are written high up on a building on upper Broadway, and I remember, going back drunk to the dorms at Columbia before the war, late at night with Mike here, when we both should have been going to Fordham, and there they were, all lit up for us against the brick. 'Where Will You Spend Eternity?' If you think that's funny, Jan, try it sometime with the Japs sinking your fleet and your anthropology professor telling you in class how he once sat down to a feast on some Pacific Island and, because he couldn't be impolite (his hosts had just recently given up eating people), tried the beetle soup and found it pretty good—the crackly backs and all. And then every night with Mike, after washing the dishes at Schrafft's and hitting Flynn's and the Gold Rail and West End on the way up, that sign, 'Where Will You Spend Eternity?' Try it sometime, Jan, and then tell me there's no piquancy . . . are you listening? How do you think Billy Graham turned the Garden into a cathedral? It was the piquancy, I tell you. Jan—Jan! Easy on the scotch . . ."

He stopped, flushed and sweaty, and turned back toward the living room and the trees that rose to the windows' level. For just a second, as his eyes met Mike's, the mental ingenuity was gone and the simple truth was that anything was better than being alone.

"You should always sprinkle sawdust on the floor when you talk to Jan," he said. "You see those tears? And I've never been more serious. Every word almost, I meant."

But he was still embarrassed, and so was Mike, who had no faith either and could almost feel the misfired emotion subside and become disgust. No wonder Cliff liked people who proposed naive solutions to life; no wonder that the more sincerely they believed what they were saying the more entangled in discussion with them he became. He did not want only his kind of person in the world; in fact, if anything would have made the world uninhabitable for him, that would have. His complete lack of belief in anything was made tolerable only by the knowledge, which he daily verified, that there were still people walking the streets who still believed things that had become unworthy of belief before they were born. That he could

"see through" their beliefs to the paltry desires that had created them no longer even mattered. The phenomenon of unfounded belief is what both fascinated and sustained him—the idea that though God had lost His dignity, He still refused to die. It was this very humble willingness on the part of God to be evicted from eternity and to go on living in whatever cranny of man's desire He could find, that made religious people (and Jan's detritus of faith had just been laid bare) so attractive in Cliff's eyes—especially those who countenanced his blasphemies, laughed at his jokes, and worried a little about his "soul" while he was off somewhere losing it.

Cliff had been educated up to the college level by Jesuits, and having been, in class, brighter and more casuistic than they were, he had usually won the game of religious chess, check-mated them on how, even according to Catholic dogma, he could live the most ignoble, dissolute life and still get to heaven by a less circuitous route than they—"as the crow flies," as he once put it in class to a young Jesuit whose sincerity alone made him no match for Cliff. This same Jesuit was the football coach, and on the practice field he clutched at the very rapport with Cliff that failed to materialize in class. Cliff alternated between halfback and end, and not only did he excel in both positions, he played as though he really *believed* in winning—believed with all the fire and intensity with which he must have carried back from the altar his first Holy Communion.

"I'll see how she is," Mike said.

"Good idea, Mike. Convince her I was serious." He was out in the clear again. "Convince her."

Mike ignored this last sally and started through the hallway.

"Because I was!" Cliff whispered after him. "I know you don't believe me, you have commie tendencies, but I was! Every word almost, I meant."

Mike turned and started back. He felt almost untrue to himself, loving such a man. For didn't his deepest self hate him? And if so, when would his love become hypocrisy? Nothing was perfect, but this was the other way around. He expressed what he felt the least, and kept hidden what he felt the most. How long could it go on?

The old neighborhood *was* sacred, wasn't it, Cliff?—he was going to say. That's what you couldn't stand; it made you afraid; you *had* to tear it down . . . But the hallway was too long and he had time to remember the fine job Cliff had done on the window frames, so what came out was, "Your word of honor you meant almost every word?"

"Yes."

"Say it."

"On my word of honor I meant almost every word."

There had to be some final, iron-clad way to be believed, and Cliff himself had devised this way in the desert around Ahwaz in 1943. They had just finished two cold cans of American beer from the ice-box they'd dug in the desert floor where the men were putting up steel warehouses, and after one of their intense, unresolvable arguments, Cliff had said, "Whenever I say on my word of honor, Mike, you can believe me. It'll be the truth. I won't always agree to say it, and when I refuse, it will not *necessarily* mean I'm lying. The pledge will be for my benefit, not yours. But when I make it, you'll know, absolutely, that I'm telling the truth."

Mike went in and found Jan in the kitchen. She was standing with her back to the door, a bottle of Black and White in her left hand, a half-empty glass in the other. Seen from behind, with her legs apart and her arms out from her sides, she looked like one of those slender human figures that window-dressers make with wire and papier-mâché. The skin, especially around the long and slender neck, appeared that perilously close to what held her upright.

She turned and, obviously relieved that it wasn't Cliff, handed Mike the bottle and sat down. Already her body looked looser, softer, not nearly so full of nerves. Even her attitude seemed hours away from what it had actually been only a moment ago, when, with her tear ducts all out of kilter, she had left her incorrigible husband literally on the run. "Never give Jan anything straight," Cliff always said. "You couldn't get it into her bloodstream faster if you used a hypo." And it was true, just watching that first drink of the day take its effect made Mike feel better.

"Cliff does mean some of it, Jan. You're wrong there," he said as he sat opposite her and poured himself a drink.

"No, he doesn't mean a word of it. And if he did, he wouldn't know why he did. And if he did know why, he'd be lying. I live here."

"That's just it. Of all people, he doesn't want you to see the forest for the trees."

"Don't use quotes on me, will you, Mike?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know you didn't mean it. I just can't help it. Anything that even smacks of one, makes me sick." She extended her glass and he filled it again.

"What about the kids?"

"They'll be all right. They'll just wait. They have no conception of time yet."

The talk was off-hand and all the while Mike kept wondering what Cliff was doing. Neither the TV nor the radio had been turned on and there were no strains of "Danny Boy." Could Cliff have gone and taken the kids to church? Or undressed and gone to bed? How strange that after what had happened Cliff was still the one who was awaited, and not only by him, by Jan too, it seemed. Was the bastard being quiet on purpose, as a change-off from "Danny Boy"?

Then Cliff did come in. They heard him, his stomping run through the still-uncarpeted hallway, long before he reached them, and so were more or less prepared for something. Jan snapped to immediately; her lips pulled taut and lost their color; the lustre in her eyes foretold tears.

And Cliff did look different. His hands were shaking, he was panting, and his eyes had that wild, only partially observant look that enables terrorized men to avoid running into things like trees and lampposts but that's about all.

"Believe me," he kept saying "believe me," as though finally, for the first time in his life, he had something to say that deserved belief. "When you two left me in there—listen to this, will you?" He grabbed the bottle by the neck and took a drink, a long one, then spent half a minute getting all the air he could. "When you left me in there—I don't know how to say this, so bear with me, will you?—I was no longer simply alone in a room. I was alone—in the world."

Jan's face suddenly showed such revulsion that it was painful to look at. The tears coming from her eyes might have made her look pathetic were it not for the fact that the whole lower part of her face looked almost vicious. The tears were something she couldn't help; they had nothing to do with her; she might have been angry in the rain. Then, involuntarily, as though her whole body were making the sound, as though it had been literally squeezed out of her, she went, "Phew!"

"There'll be no phewing, Jan, you hear? I mean it." His face had somehow gotten very close to hers, and it was stern, serious, and full of bite. No stranger would have doubted for a moment that he meant what he was saying, and even Jan, looking at him out of the corners of her teary eyes, showed signs of begrudged belief. Cliff had, on top of everything else, a terrible temper.

He waited for his warning to sink in, then went on in a voice both reasonable and expository again: "All my fears were suddenly where I was, and not only *where* I was, there was only enough of me left to make my fears possible. I felt not quite real, not quite myself, more like myself emeritus—the way it must be the first few minutes after you die, before you're used to it . . ." He had gradually lowered his voice, and now, bending over, sent his hand slowly outward over the table between them. The thought occurred to Mike that perhaps he *was* insane. He appeared to be serious, and yet Mike could not have believed him less if he had just said he was Napoleon. It was a terrible affliction, this constant willingness of Cliff's to work like a veritable family of beavers over nothing. The effort was exhausting merely to watch. And yet, and yet—the truth lived such a ragged, boozy life within him, the way it kept reeling and bumping into falsehood and excusing itself with exaggerated politeness and then falling on its face again and getting up and brushing itself off in a never-ending attempt to look dignified, that one simply had to listen and even to hope that at last, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, was coming out.

His hand was still traveling over the table between them and he was saying: "I sent my imagination batlike into the dark, a blind but sensuous carrier of awesome messages, and felt more than ever cut off from the ceremonials that make men men." And when Jan, unable to control herself a moment longer, went "Phew!" again, he brought his fist down on the table with all his might. "I said no more phewing! Do you hear? This is the truth! Almost all of it. And I say almost out of my deep respect for honesty, because absolute truth is my never-never land as you both know. But enough *explaining*. All right? So I was out there, on this sort of continental shelf leading back through the history of the race, and I wanted to shout, 'I'm here! I'm here! I'm here!' But I didn't, and it wasn't because this is the first time I've worn this suit and I wasn't sure it was me. It was because I knew that even if I *did* shout, it wouldn't be *to* anybody. There was no one but myself and I was the last person I wanted to be just then. That's why I wanted to shout. I thought there was an outside chance that I was someone else without knowing it, and that after I shouted a few times, whoever that someone else was would make himself felt. But in my heart I knew that even if I did shout, and no matter how loud, whoever I turned out to be would still be me. So I just stood there, nailed to myself and with

all hope gone of ever tearing myself loose. Do you understand what I'm saying at all? For just that split second I was a dead man, and if not for that nail holding me to myself, I would have gone out of life and died altogether. I was dead, all right, I just wasn't *able* to die. I grabbed for something (it was the book-case you gave us for Christmas, Mike, but probably anything hard, that didn't give, would have done it), and that did it. I was back, alive, but I knew I would never be the same again."

He took another drink, a quick one this time, and came up with a vague, objectless smile. Then he thought of something and it disappeared. "I said 'split second' because I don't see how a man can be dead any longer than that without having his heart massaged. But however long it lasted, whether it was two seconds, three minutes, an hour,"—the vague, objectless smile was back—"how it purged me of the lousiness of life! I looked at the sun coming in like a man who has spent his life in tunnels; my belief in joy carried to my toes; remembered scraps of affection became feasts I couldn't finish. I promised to explore in earnest the beauty of the world, to preach biology, if necessary, to those in despair . . ."

"Jesus, this filth!" Jan said. "I can't stand it."

"And then . . ." Cliff went on. The endless suggestiveness of his face, the way it could work at cross purposes with itself and express sincerity, fraudulence, incipient pieties and plans for future deceits, all at one and the same time, had to be seen to be believed. He had both hands on the table now and was looking down at them, using a quieter, more conversational tone of voice. Either he didn't hear Jan's outburst or he no longer cared. "And then something impelled me to go through with it. When I first mentioned the prayer I wasn't completely serious, but then I never am. And even after I blessed myself and started to pray, I *still* wasn't completely serious. I guess I was so relieved that the empty feeling was gone that I was feinting and faking all over again, just to keep out of the way. But when I turned to come in here, to *tell* you I had prayed and kid you about it a little more (this is the part I hate myself for, because I was going to go right on *kidding* you about it!) I glanced at the sofa and the stains . . ."

Jan grabbed the bottle and poured herself a drink. "Wait," Cliff said, "there's more coming." But she drained the glass and he waited patiently until she finished coughing. He even reached over and got a napkin for her.

"At first I thought it was the sun, because I had been staring at the sun all during that urge I had to shout, 'I'm here! I'm here!' But then when I held my eyes closed and went nearer and began blinking, and I was no farther away than this,"—he measured with his hands to show how very close he'd gone to the cushion—"there was not a *sign* of any ink. And what got me, the part that . . ."

"God damn it!" Mike jumped up. "This has gone far enough!"

"What has? I *know* it has. But—God strike me dead—it's out of my hands now."

Mike, to his own and even Cliff's surprise, suddenly gave him a violent shove backwards against the refrigerator. "How much of this do you expect others to take? Why don't you close your mouth and take some of it yourself?"

"The anxiety of finitude, you mean?" croaked Cliff. He was *congenitally* incapable of relenting. Indeed, the torment in his eyes as he asked the question, the urgency in his voice for a no-foolishness answer, made you forget for a moment how utterly baseless everything was. You thought rather of the fire and intensity, the mental activity, the very aspiration in the teeth of the baselessness. With such advantages, what would he do with something worthwhile, something really important? Nothing? Was the aspiration toward just that, nothing? "But Mike," he was saying, "that was death I just experienced, I tell you. I was a goner out there for a minute. And then, willy-nilly . . . but why go on? As Cardinal Newman said, 'It is as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing.' "

Mike had become intensely interested in the ink on Cliff's fingers, the one finger especially, with which he had touched the stain. "You say the stains on the sofa are gone?"

"Mike, I don't blame you."

"Are they gone?"

"Yes."

"Are they gone on your word of honor?"

"On my word of honor they're gone. They're not only gone, there isn't a trace of them."

A counter-counter-counter spy could not have stared at Mike more enigmatically. Not only was there seriousness in his expression, there was also playful scorn. And strangely, or rather, fittingly, enough, it was the playful scorn that decided in Cliff's favor. Mike knew from experience that in truthful situations Cliff often used playful scorn for future reference, in the event he could not resist being scornful when he was joking.

"But go in, go in!" he was saying. "I don't blame you for not believing me. If God Himself stepped into this kitchen I wouldn't be completely serious, *you* know that, so don't let my foolishness now fool you. Go in and see for yourself. This life *is* nothing but a vale of tears. Boy, have I found that out!"

"Come on, Jan," Mike said. "Let's go in."

The five or six ounces she had taken, all within a matter of minutes, showed when she stood up. Jan had a tendency to shiver, or shake, when intoxicated, and after negotiating the long hallway and swinging at rather an exaggerated angle into the living room, that was what she started to do almost immediately. For the sofa was, as Cliff had said, absolutely without a trace of ink. There was no smell of cleaning fluid, no dampness in the fabric, and no sign that it had been rubbed in any way.

"The absolute instant, eh, Jan?" Cliff said. He noticed her shakiness, got the Mexican child's chair for her and, taking her by the shoulders ("Squatty-voo"), helped her to sit down. Then with a face as undecipherable as a clock without hands, he turned to Mike and said, "Well, which is it, environment or heredity?"

Mike went up and felt the cushions; he rubbed them and sniffed his hands. Then he began turning them over.

"I would have done the same thing," Cliff said. And when the other side of the cushion proved to be spotless too: "Can't you see that what's bothering you is not what *I* say, but your own tendency to believe it's possible? There were stains and I prayed for them to go away. Now they're gone. It's incontrovertible. And what makes it wonderful, especially from your point of view, is that until all religion has disappeared from the face of the earth, we will each of us retain some small, tiny, infinitesimal vestige of belief. Your vestige is what's bothering you, Mike, not mine. And I say everybody to his own vestige. Okay? Agreed?"

"Let's see the pen."

"Right out of the Bible. When St. Thomas goes poking into Christ's wounds . . ." He unclipped the pen from his pocket. "Here, have the Consumer's Research people look it over for you."

"Shut up! Do you think I believe you, even for an instant?"

"I just want to say that the more steam you let off now," Cliff said, "the better off you'll be later. What you're both doing without realizing it is preparing yourselves to believe, and that's good. So say anything you want to me. The important thing is that your doubt,

though it's stronger now than ever, *I* know that, is finally getting too big for its own breeches. Right? Beginning to squeeze and bind a little, isn't it?"

Mike suddenly began frisking Cliff but found nothing. On the other hand, if there were another pen, Cliff would surely have hidden it.

Meanwhile, Cliff was mumbling as if to himself, "Alone—but—not—lonely. Not any more." He turned to Jan. "You better get to church, Jan. It's too late for the ten, but you can still make the eleven."

"Jan, before you go," Mike said with his eyes still fastened to Cliff's face (why hadn't he thought of it before?), "get out the check Cliff wrote for you. It's in your bag. I put it there *before* you went to the kitchen."

And Cliff's face did pale a little. In court Mike would have sworn that the cheeks lost color at that moment. Even so, there were a hundred and one reasons for a man's face to pale. Especially Cliff's.

"Wait, Jan, wait," he said. "Don't open that bag." He backed away from them toward the front of the room like someone in a cowboy picture. They had him covered but there were still the windows behind him, and right down below, saddled and ready to go, was Silver. Indeed, no one on the screen or off could be more aggrieved, or more unregenerate, than Cliff Reardon caught unequivocally in the wrong. At such times his face ran an almost Dostoyevskian gamut of responses. Fear, cajolery, remorse, resentment and unrequited nefariousness all turned in a kind of gestalt stew while the gritty shell-game drawl turned soft as glycerin and the larcenous hands made vague and futile attempts at gestures usually reserved for the Sabbath. And what made it so poignant and even lovable was that this was his topmost capacity for appropriate behavior. The serious and the ridiculous, and not only the serious and the ridiculous, the very history of America and of religion, dime novels and the world's great books, philosophy, psychology and anthropology, the mountainous trash of the pulps—all were so mixed up within him that when he was excited like this, he became a veritable pin-wheel of confusion, the opposite of synthesis, discrimination or control.

" 'So full of artless jealousy is guilt/ It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.' That's what you're thinking, isn't it? Something is rotten. But wait, I pray thee. The inning isn't over yet, and as someone said

on TV recently, only God can make a tree. Suppose the ink's gone from the check too—and I don't know whether it is or not, but let's *suppose* it is—does that prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that a miracle has not taken place here today? When Christ turned the water into wine, there was a surplus, wasn't there? I mean He didn't go around taking orders like a waiter, did He? 'How much wine would the bride like? Two glasses? Thank you! And the groom? Four? Righto! Two for the bride and four for the groom. That makes six so far.' And so on and so forth. Did He? No. He just told them to fill the six stone jugs with water and let it go at that, and it turned out to be a pretty nice little miracle for a starter, didn't it? Well, maybe when He said kaput to the ink here this morning, the same kind of surplus action took place . . ."

"So it was all a joke?" Jan said.

"Whether there's ink on that check or not, I'm not going to think it was a joke. That check might be the very thing God is using to test us. At this very moment, He may be thinking to Himself, 'How much of a miracle does a man need?'" Jan had begun to open the bag. "Just remember, He's watching us, that's all. It may be a test. And it may not be. But just as surely as your hand is going in that bag, He sees your hand going in. He *is* your hand, Jan. Watch it. Careful."

Jan took out the check and, before unfolding it, turned to her husband. She looked like one of those women who are afraid to get on escalators. "Is it blank?" she said.

"I don't *know,* I told you. And what's more, I don't care. *I've* got it,"—he pounded his chest—"and I'm going to keep it."

Jan unfolded the check, looked at it, let it fall to the floor, then could not find her handkerchief in time and sat back down on the Mexican child's chair crying into her lap. For the check was made out exactly as Cliff had made it out, the date, fifty dollars, signature.

Cliff tip-toed over and picked it up. "Hosanna. Our Lord went all out."

"Are you sure there aren't two checks in your bag?" Mike said. And when Jan looked and shook her head: "And you *did* take the bag into the kitchen with you?"

"Yes. I had it with me all the time."

"'However convincing the argument, however holy the arguer, the act of faith remains an act of choice which no one can do for another,'" Cliff said. "Ibid, the most prolific author of them all." He laughed.

"You know, I really used to think that. Back in parochial. Maybe it was Catholicism, I don't know. But I'd be doing my homework or something, and on the sly, you know? I'd stop and think, 'This Ibid, who the hell *is* he? The son of a gun really used to bother me, and I wouldn't ask the Sister or my mother or anyone because I could just hear them, 'You never heard of *Ibid*?' 'Sure, I've heard of him,' I probably would have said, 'I've practically heard of nobody else, but who *is* he?' That went on for years, and it got so bad that anything Ibid said, I couldn't forget. I hated the bastard so much, I guess, I just couldn't get him out of my system."

Mike had taken the check and pen and was about to compare the two inks when he stopped and shook his head. "No, you wrote it with this pen."

"Mike, God is extending his hand to you. What are you waiting for, the old fraternity grip? No *wonder* Christ was crucified. With people like you around it's a wonder Houdini wasn't. I'm sick for you, Mike. Heart-and-mind-sick. If that wasn't a bona fide miracle . . ."

"Cut it out, will you? I'm not the one you're doing this to."

"If you're referring to my wife—Jan, go to church. Go as you've never gone before." He went up and helped her to her feet. "And maybe next week, God willing, I'll go with you."

They waited for Jan to go in and put cold water on her face. She came back strangely silent and was apparently not angry with Cliff any more. In fact, the person she seemed to want to avoid now was Mike.

When she left, Mike said, "How did you do it?"

Cliff just shook his head and sighed.

"All right, Cliff. I'm a fool, but will you tell me you didn't use disappearing ink? You could easily have switched pens while we were turned toward the windows."

"Precisely so. I could have. And did I *make* you turn toward the windows?"

"Yes. You wouldn't stop talking."

"Precisely so. And did I *make* you put the check in Jan's bag? Did I *make* her take it with her to the kitchen? No, Mike, no. Even assuming I did use a phony pen, what you must admit is that you and Jan helped to make it *look* like a miracle. That's the irreducible minimum you must give me."

"All right, so we helped make it 'look' like a miracle. So what?"

"But don't you see? That irreducible minimum is God. Even if I did use a phony pen, you created your own test of faith. But of course I didn't use a phony pen, I'm not admitting a thing. I'm just willing, for the moment, to admit it, in order to give you a peep at how God works. For if there's a millionth chance that I didn't use a phony pen, and there is, you know there is, then God has gotten Himself lodged in one, if only one, of the millions of cells in your body. So be patient, and in the street, going up and down crowded elevators, on the subway and so forth, keep your chalice shielded from the eyes of others—especially cab-drivers. With a lapsed Catholic like you, it will no doubt take time. That is —'Rancour will out.' You'll just have to be patient. The kind of doubt you suffer from cannot, and should not, be washed away from the outside in. To be lasting and effective it must be washed away from the inside out. So my hands are tied, out of feeling for you, they're tied. 'I must be cruel,' as, who was it? said, 'only to be kind.'"

"How desperately you ridicule what you're afraid to face," Mike said. "And at everybody else's expense! That's what gets me. I'm going to tell Jan the truth the moment she comes back."

"What is the truth, Mike? Do you know? Who would be in Satan's employ if it turned out that there is no other pen, and never was? Why don't you search me, send me out of the house, and then search this place thoroughly before Jan comes back? If you find a phony pen . . ."

"What did you do, fling it out the window?"

"All right, back to the irreducible minimum, then."

"Do you even need *my* belief?" Mike said. "You know you're lying, but if I believe, if I even begin not to doubt, then you've got *your* irreducible minimum."

"Ten, fifteen minutes ago, I would have bought that. Now . . .?"

Mike turned away. He went to the outermost window in the bay and leaned out. It was still a beautiful day and nothing had happened to the park. Cliff's boyhood, youth, the games and sleigh rides—were they there, somewhere, with the phony pen? He remembered the funny remark about Ibid being a writer, and tears came to his eyes. For nothing had happened to him either, and the giddy relief he'd felt on rushing into the apartment thinking Cliff was dead . . . but he cut the thought short and kept looking, staring, at the flickering blue-green leaves.

GOTTFRIED BENN:

Night Cafe

Translated by Michael Hamburger

824: The Love and Life of Women.
The 'cello has a quick drink. The flute
belches throughout three beats: oh, lovely sunset.
The drum reads on to the end of the thriller.

Green teeth, pimples in his face,
waves to conjunctivitis.

Grease in his hair
talks to open mouth with swollen tonsils,
faith hope and charity round his neck.

Young goitre is sweet on saddle-nose.
He stands her three half-pints.

Sycosis buys carnations
to mollify double chin.

B minor: sonata op. 35.
A pair of eyes roars out:
Don't splash the blood of Chopin around the place
for this lot to slouch about in!
Hey, Gigi! Stop!—

The door dissolves: a woman.
Desert dried out. Canaanite brown.
Chaste. Full of caves. A scent comes with her. Hardly scent.
It's only a sweet leaning forward of the air
against my brain.

A paunched obesity waddles after her.

PIERO HELICZER:

The Tomb of Henry James (ii)

for jean claude

HENRY JAMES
DRUMMER
ISOUD LE BLAUNCHE MAYNYS

the drummer dressed in black delivers his prologue on the apron in front of the closed curtains

DRUMMER on deads flowered throne suspended
in branches

and leaves smelling of parchment
and cathedral windows sits dead

searching
his beard pillowed mouth with long

fingers he is troubled
by the knowledge that he has just eaten the last

sour ball there wont be any for the rest of the week
dead is a fop

reality is his acceptance of failure
he does not

think of himself as a turkish
sultan preparing to hunt the

black boar
in the woods of his hungarian dominion

or even as a magistrate
of some sort waiting for plaintiff and defendant

dead waits patiently at the counter for bicarbonate
of soda his brain irked

by the proceedings the inferiority of his position
the neon light that falls on his fingers
dead is really
like a hollow clam
pearl hopeless crowscared with sandstraw
do not blame
his foppishness therefore
and you are mortal ladies and mortal

gentlemen and may be dead

he opens the curtains discovering henry james seated by an early american typewriter

HENRY JAMES i am writing a play
though i am a writer and this birthmark
on my stretched temple shaped like a bat
confirms my office the idea
of writing seems so strange
to me that i write about writing
that i suppose adds strangeness
to strangeness
unalleviated

DRUMMER is there an occasion

picks up drum and rattles a few flourishes as to announce a puppet show

plays
are for occasions like music

HENRY JAMES it is deads birth day and the play
standing up the crickets play

another flourish as james opens back curtains revealing a blue puppet stage simultaneously the gauze curtains of the puppet stage open discovering an artist at his easel he paints looking at his work intently and from various distances from time to time finally he seems satisfied and hangs the painting over his bed he looks out a window painted in the backdrop for a while then decides to go to bed as he sleeps the painting falls from the wall and kills the painter quick curtains this time of black gauze

DRUMMER but man what are you trying to say

HENRY JAMES i dont know i am not even sure
if that was the play i wrote
but it is the intention that matters
and not the intention of the play
but what the play is intended for
i hope to amuse dead i hope
to cajole him conjure him and by various
prophylactic masks to sweeten the blood
that drops in his arteries like cracks in a sun dial

DRUMMER he already has shakspere

james is crestfallen he closes back curtains isoud pokes her head through almost knocking him down

ISOUD i liked it cricket
but i am not dead
nor never was

HENRY JAMES lady i sang
on a stone
altar for beauty

faintly but your ears
delicate as a bats membrane

ISOUD its uglyness was so compelling
enraptured it seemed to ask
and i was incredibly intimate with it

james has heard only the first two words of her speech he is disappointed isoud entering kisses him then dances a very brief dance as drummer speaks for her

DRUMMER as a new music becoming alive
scented like a willing woman
moves to the mind that hears

or as the germ of wishable stuff
does not shape itself in the wells mirror
and yet perhaps one must have studied

alchemy for these miracles

HENRY JAMES almost screaming — the memory of waiting is
as children weeping
i wont wait any longer

exit

ISOUD surprised — cricket

DRUMMER peremptorily — cricket

as chorus he is angry that james did not stay to finish the play james had been rather good about showing up for rehearsals but drummer is not surprised instead he mutters to himself that it is just like james to do this

isoud opens back curtains preparing to leave the stage darkens instantly the puppet tent is silhouetted in a manner that one can see the lifeless dummies hanging inside the frame henry james wearing a ghost mask dances a wild and tense dance called the dance from the tomb into the grave at the end of it he stops suddenly and throws his mask at the puppet stage

HENRY JAMES — i am barren barren
why do you grin at me
like the childs knife that robbed the mask
of its pips

ISOUD — after much suffering away from life
you had forgotten the suffering in life

the three of them close the back curtains there is enough light to make the next scene brown like burlap they form a circle holding hands and loll their heads in some kind of dry modern despair

ISOUD to james what is the grave like

DRUMMER it is not a grave but a tomb
the antonym of grave as music is grave
empty of graven as thoughts are graven
and of graves as hearts are graves

HENRY JAMES within is only dead and darkness that isnt
dark snipped curls
from boyish heads within
is not within but what
without has formed of fops guts

ISOUD it is without itself

HENRY JAMES and without is not without but squirrels
running down leafless branch to trunks mortise

LAURENCE DONOVAN:

Retrospective

Whatever we do
Waked to arms and locks,
Iron strikings or
The gatherings of love,
By night moon mocks.

Whatever we say
Touched by the ruly sun
To bright speech over
Bed or grave
She comments upon.

Whatever we do,
Whatever we say,
Or kill or kiss,
That we may seize
The twin lips of day,

Whatever we say,
Whatever we do,
Or kiss or kill,
Cheat moon will chill
All sun has warmed us to.

Tower of Blue Horses

(for Franz Marc)

Truly blue horses stand in plastic time
And form a tower
Tinwhinny tall, proud bauble rainbow high
In a moment of listening

Then, struck from the lunate heart
All pure colors come down
And grass freezes wild
Under the pedestalled hooves:

Here the green world is heard, far
Valleys curved in the manes,
And death in their eyes
Speaks from the fabulous mountains.

Later, three formal deer
Blue, red, speckled, all dappled

By prismatic leaves
Will form in a glen
Their own single silence,
Color of rainbow, tinwhinny

Distant and blue

MARCIA C. STUBBS:

The Pilgrim Spirit

> ". . . and I then call it a 'Pilgrim Spirit' because it goes up spiritually and like a pilgrim who is out of his own country."
> —Dante, *La Vita Nuova*

Reading Alain-Fournier's novel, *Le Grand Meaulnes,* is an experience something like looking at a familiar object through water. You can recognize the object . . . say it is your own hand. You know that were you to remove your hand from the water it would appear almost exactly the same as the other at your side. You could use it to turn a page of the book beside you, and running it over the grass on which you sit you would feel the same mixture of softness and coarseness to which you are accustomed. But while you let it dangle in the water it does not appear quite like the hand that never, until now, had you questioned to be yours. Its shape is slightly different, its outlines but hazily defined. It has a dream-like strangeness to it, though the water is not strange to you, and the object is most certainly a hand, and it is yours.

Le Grand Meaulnes seems to glide through a sequence of dream-like events. The tone is muted, at times mysterious, continually evoking what Fournier once described to his friend, Jacques Rivière, as "the strange lost paradise which I inhabit." [1] But conscious of the barriers the symbolists had erected between themselves and their readers with their shadowy, abstracted characters, Fournier was careful to make his characters credible people. They are, for the most part, young boys. They feel the fears, hopes, doubts and joys of youth. Woven in and out of their extraordinary adventures are the rather prosaic duties and pleasures of the schoolboy. They study with familiar impatience, and with a violence peculiar to youth, participate in school yard games or oppose each other in arguments. And the world in which they live is as credible as they. Fournier pays very minute attention to details. You know the Sologne landscape, the

[1] Jacques Rivière et Alain-Fournier, *Correspondance, 1905-1914,* Revised edition, Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1928. Emile-Paul Frères published Fournier's *Lettres au Petit B* in 1930, and *Lettres d'Alain-Fournier a sa Famille,* 1949.

exact feel of the weather or the particular time of day, that there are porcelain lamps in Uncle Florentin's shop, and that the house "from which we launched our adventures and to which they returned to break themselves like waves on a bare rock" had five glass doors and a Virginia creeper growing on its walls.[2]

The delicate balance between the mysterious and the tangible, between dream and reality is no accident. Fournier became increasingly aware as he learned his craft that to make by means of this balance a reconstruction of the world he knew "en merveille et en mystère" would be his vocation. The effect in the novel is incredibly difficult to describe, perhaps because it demands to be experienced. The word "experience," I think, is the key. Fournier's technique emphasizes experience; his purpose is to affirm the reality of the experiences he describes, however strange they may seem. Through the objectivity of the details he brings the reader close to the events so that he may enter into them without difficulty. There are no private symbols and the senses perform as usual. Through the strangeness and the mystery he increases our consciousness of the world we have entered. For the first time, perhaps we question that it is our hand we see through the water, and we become aware that it is.

The effect is all the more astonishing when we consider the kind of experiences we feel this sympathy for. *Le Grand Meaulnes* is the story of a romantic search for a beautiful girl met briefly at a strange festival, an attempt on the part of an individual to order all experience to the attainment of a single desire, to achieve tranquillity out of restlessness, to fulfill expectations of happiness roused by a chance encounter. Chance encounter? No, not so. When the hero, Meaulnes, realizes that he has begun his journey without premeditation he is filled with a profound joy, when he enters the drive of the forsaken manor, "a strange contentment urged him on, a perfect and almost intoxicating peace, the assurance that his goal had been reached and that he had now nothing but happiness to expect," and after the mad, feverish festival at the manor, sitting in the quiet parlor listening among children to the young girl playing softly on the piano, "Meaulnes found that he had dropped into the most peaceful happiness on earth . . . Then began a dream like his old dream . . ." His old dream, where this parlour was his own home, and the unknown

[2] In quoting from the novel I have used Francoise Delisle's translation entitled *The Wanderer*, introduced by Havelock Ellis, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1928. The novel is now available as a Doubleday Anchor Book.

person playing the piano was his wife. The assurance of peace, the experience of happiness, the dream of fulfillment are no more chance occurrences to Meaulnes, or to Fournier, than was the meeting with Beatrice to Dante, or the promises of heaven to the Christian whose will is bent on eternal rest.

And Meaulnes, during his adventure, is pure will. In accepting the schoolboy we also, and at once, participate in his dedicated search. Even if we wished to separate "le Grand Meaulnes," the ring leader of the top form, from the silent mysterious wanderer, accepting the one and regarding the other from a distance with curiosity, or perhaps amusement, we could not. No more successfully than we could draw a line through the center of a river when spring floods its banks. Nor do we wish to. For though we would recognize the school boy, his life would be no more tragic (and but little more interesting) than the failure to pass an examination, or a lost love. And the search of the dreamer would be no more moving than that of a fairy-tale prince or figure whose sole dimensions are designed to fit an allegory. But the Meaulnes that Fournier created, or knew, . . . or was, is real, though "unrealistic," unlike anyone we ever knew, except perhaps, ourselves.

The point is that Fournier is driving into the heart of experience while seeming to take us beyond experience as we are accustomed to regard it. I use "seeming" advisedly. Even the most improbable event, that fantastic festival at a forsaken manor, is given a plausible explanation. A fond father is indulging the whim of an eccentric son. But even eccentric must be qualified. Frantz de Galais is eccentric, even mad by ordinary standards. Millie would judge him so, Delouche does, Seurel is tempted to when the enchantment of their strange adventure begins to dim. But in the light of the whole story Frantz is no more mad than, say, Delouche, who is rigidly committed to what is ordinary, practical and base. Frantz, like Meaulnes, is engaged in a search. His conception of the end of his search is narrower, his path not as clearly sensed or assiduously followed, his will not as pure. His limitations force him to an exaggerated posture like the "homme qui tombe" that Fournier once observed with deep attention. One can imagine that in a smaller arena, where one could be confident of his fate, Frantz' rôle would be comic. But the dimensions of his adventure continually expand, eluding definition, his search too is based on a memory, or a vision he experiences, and his "madness" casts but a shade on the moving image of Meaulnes' adventure.

On this single kind of experience Fournier molds a tragic and consequently moving story. The conflict is simple in its scope. It is subjective in so far as it concerns the receptivity of the hero to the forces he is destined to encounter in and about him. But it is not "psychological." If Fournier moved away from symbolism with the personal discovery that "there is no art and no truth but of the particular" it was not to employ his art examining "the ephemeral, the mechanism, the mask social and inconstant," the province of "naturalism" or "realism" in art, but in service of what he called, for lack of a better word, "dreams." "There are errors of dreams, false trails, changes of direction, and it is all this that lives, that excites, snags, loosens, and throws into disorder. The rest of the character is more or less of a mechanism—social or animal—and is not interesting." *Le Grand Meaulnes* is not concerned with a divided will, or personalities in conflict with each other, or man in "society" or the opposition of social forces. The stresses that give rise to conflict all come from one direction.

Looking only at Meaulnes' search, the conflict, the failure to achieve his objective rises in part, ironically, from the intensity of his desires and the perfection of his memory. When Frantz is reunited with Valentine his simple adventure ends and he is apparently at rest. It is almost as if time stood still from the moment of their separation to the moment of their marriage, that the intervening history, the "errors of their dreams" are illusions merely. Not so with Meaulnes. Marriage to Yvonne increases his torment. The end of his search appears now within his grasp but he can not yet claim it. For he had met Yvonne at a fête intended to celebrate the marriage of Frantz, a celebration interrupted by Valentine's "scruples, fear, lack of faith," and in the course of his wanderings, his attempt to find once more the lost manor and the beautiful girl, he has met Frantz and committed himself to a vow to restore the conditions of the meeting. It is the vow that dooms Meaulnes, but not the vow alone. Seurel, too, had taken it, but sensibly does not feel bound to keep it when the happiness of Meaulnes and Yvonne is at stake. Meaulnes having met and abandoned Valentine while unaware that she is Frantz' fiancée is now doubly committed. He is "powerless" to be happy until he has atoned for his error, and brought Frantz, who is more than a friend, a part now of his own nature, to rest. Irony of fate! In bringing Frantz to his rest Meaulnes loses his own. For the time that stood still for Frantz does not do so for Meaulnes.

It travels faster than he, bringing with it the death of Yvonne and the failure of Meaulnes' mission.

That Fournier's hero is engaged in a mission is, I think, a more accurate word-description than search or wandering. Meaulnes' experience at the festival was, in a sense, a religious conversion. In one instant he had seen his paradise, and from that instant the rest of his life takes form. The vow, that Seurel comes to think of as "childish," is, for Meaulnes, a sacred rite. There is no question, for him, of the authority of Frantz' quest; they are as fellow communicants to the same mystery. Mission, too, suggests the passion, the religious fervor with which Meaulnes pursues his ideal. And the end of his search *is* ideal. Meaulnes tells Yvonne on their wedding night, "I am not worthy of you," and at one point, though reluctant to disbelieve in the promise, despairs of completing his mission in this world. "Our adventure is at an end," he writes to Seurel,

> Winter this year is as dead as the grave. Perhaps when we die, perhaps death alone will give us the key, the sequence and the end of this adventure that failed.

At the point in the narrative that Meaulnes writes this letter, his judgment is premature. But at the end of the book, as Seurel imagines Meaulnes, in the night, wrapping his little daughter in his cloak and setting off for new adventures, we understand the truth that the action has prepared. It is the despair of the chorus' song in *Hippolytus* " . . . change succeeds to change, and man's life veers in endless restlessness." And one begins this seemingly simple tale again with a shock at its continuity. Christening bells stop suddenly "like festive chimes at a mistaken time and place" and Seurel entering his own home with some misgiving finds that Augustin Meaulnes has come, marking the beginning of a new life and the end of "peaceful, childlike delights."

If Meaulnes is on a mission the crucial characterization is Yvonne de Galais, for it is the purpose of his search that gives it validity and that transforms *Le Grand Meaulnes* from a melancholy evocation of childhood, as it has often been regarded, to the affirmation Fournier wanted to record. "It may take much time and rigorous work," he wrote in an early letter, "before I can recover the thoughts proper to me, from under the philosophical and literary veils where I have deeply hidden them, and then, on my knees, I will bend to them and transcribe them word by word." The fragile beauty, the spiritual grace of Yvonne, her quiet wisdom, even her dress, so simple as to seem at first eccentric, justify Meaulnes' joy in meeting her and his

agony when he despairs of finding her again. But what of the terror he feels at their approaching marriage, and his deliberate flight?

It is clear that Fournier intended Meaulnes' flight as a renunciation of human happiness, and his terror as a revelation of the power he had innocently encountered. In a very early sketch of the book he was writing (July 27, 1909) he describes to Rivière a character who is discovered at the end, in the midst of others who have felt a mysterious triumph in a new country that is like the expansion of their own hearts. He, as on a tower, feels the world they have discovered gradually gaining momentum and approaching him, like a wave. In terror, he daily records the mortal influx in a book. At last, at the very height of his tower, he understands that the true joy is not of this world, and he dies, writing something, perhaps a name. "Perhaps the name will be Marie. But then," he adds, "I would not write my book." It had been only two months before, in a letter to Rivière, that he regretted not having asked the Virgin at Lourdes, whom he had recently visited, the miracle of returning to him his love. This was, of course, the real Yvonne, whom Fournier had met and lost while a student in Paris, and the letter, written on Ascension Day, the anniversary of the meeting, was a customary observance. "And the other day," he here adds, "did I not prove to myself that my book will end in some great triumph for the Virgin?"

About a year later and closer to the mark he wrote, again to Rivière,

> You understand, my book is the story by Keats: "Some among us have encountered Antigone in another life, and no other human love can now satisfy them." Only, here, it is in this life itself that Antigone has been encountered.
>
> And then in this very simple drama, as Jacques has said before, "my whole soul breaks its bonds."
>
> In the last part, the hero finds Antigone again. There will be here a renunciation which I wish to be more fitting than that of *La Porte Etroite* [Gide's *Strait Is the Gate.*] Because it will not be without cause. Because behind this gesture, this human renunciation, one *will experience* the whole realm of joy attained.

The purpose of the hero's search in *Le Grand Meaulnes,* which comprehends both approach and flight, joy and terror, becomes clear when Yvonne first appears at the crisis of his adventure, the mysterious fête, but it had been conceived long before, revealed in a dream "a vision that he had had when a child, and of which he had never

spoken to anyone." A purpose that is clearly divine in nature, and that receives its earthly affirmation when Meaulnes and Yvonne meet. "Who are you? What are you doing here? I don't know you. And yet it seems to me that I do know you," Yvonne's glance seemed to say. "Oh, saith the heavenly Christian, I know both whither I go and to whom. I have gone this way many a time before."

Yvonne, attracting Meaulnes to perfection by her presence, embodies the feminine ideal, chaste but maternal, emerging from France's Christian past that Fournier had celebrated in "Le Corps de la Femme." [3] But she does not appear to the other characters, nor to the reader, as an allegorical personage or symbol. Though suggesting another world out of space and time, she does not merely represent it; she brings it clearly within the bounds of this world. The patient Seurel writes on first seeing her "I say it in all simplicity of heart, but knowing well what I say, the most beautiful girl the world may ever have held." She speaks, he notes, with ease of delicate things, of what is "secret and subtle and only comes off well in books," but she acts from intelligible human motives; she is in love with Meaulnes and wants to make him happy. A benign influence seems to radiate from her, affecting even Delouche, but she is mostly unaware of her influence and thinks of herself as perhaps a school teacher who will instruct young boys. She suffers from pain and she dies leaving with Seurel the actual "taste of earth and death." She appears within the action surrounded by light, but she casts real shadows too, reminding us less perhaps of a medieval illumination than of the wholly natural appearances in myths and legends of gods and goddesses to the mortals and half-mortals of their choice. Nor does *Le Grand Meaulnes* "instruct" in the manner of an allegory. Though rising from the first to the high ground of the Grail tradition, it springs not so much from a system of thought or body of truth logically employed as from an intuition, a particular way of perceiving the nature of reality. Rendered as a narrative of what might have been, and in fact largely was, an actual experience, with all of its sensuous details immediately present, *Le Grand Meaulnes* catches us off guard as a myth does, and engaging us step by step, leads us to an imaginative participation of the senses in a drama of the spirit.

The action of the novel, the sequence of events, is intended to reveal the marvelous within the realm of human experience no less

[3] Fournier's first published essay, collected with others of his short pieces, poems and stories under the title *Miracles,* Gallimard, 1924. Introduction by Rivière.

than the character of Yvonne implies. There is a series of climactic, though seemingly accidental, meetings: Frantz in his association with a group of "bohémiens" wanders into the village where Meaulnes impatiently waits the renewal of his adventures, Valentine waits in despair on the very bench that Meaulnes chooses as he takes up his hopeless vigil in Paris; Seurel's own family, and even Delouche, have knowledge within them, though like the "vilains" of courtly romances only half-knowing what it imports. Meaulnes, weary and torn by brambles in the woods, is helped by peasants, who point out, unaware, the "right path." And Seurel, when "the outcome of this high adventure" depends on him, feels himself transformed and finds that his bad knee has been cured. I have before rejected chance in the meeting between Meaulnes and Yvonne and proposed fate to explain the failure of Meaulnes' mission. But fate must be rejected as surely as was chance. For while chance wrongly suggests a fortuitous lack of connection between events, fate errs on the side of determinism, a lack of benign purpose, impersonality. Meaulnes' meeting with Yvonne and the events in which it is embedded, must fairly be attributed to providence. " . . . my art," wrote Fournier, "strives now towards the essential passage. I choose between moments those that are marked by grace."

For Fournier there were no coincidences and no machines, and the suggestion of a power beyond human power, both permeating and directing experience, is present in his novel in more than the obvious sequence of events. It subtly penetrates the entire tone of the prose. At every turn in the story a dream perhaps, a vision, an inexplicable feeling, a sudden decision, enters the consciousness of each character to suggest some unknown power urging him on, some unseen hand coloring his experience, some quality of his search that sets it apart from all other earthly events. The insistence upon mystery, strangeness, ineffability and purpose is repeated in the casual but recurrent use of delicate, illusive images—sand, rain, wind, changes of weather; and in a diction that is not exactly archaic but odd, as if secretly engaged. Seurel writes, for example, on the day of the marriage, in a passage that must have been one of the more distressing to translate:

> The wide window which looks on the firs opens onto a wooden balcony invaded by unruly grass bending under the wind. A light, as of a burning fire, is reflected on the panes of the window where from time to time a shadow is seen to pass. Silence and solitude are all around: in the neighboring fields, in the kitchen garden,

> in the farm which alone remains of the old outhouses. The farm hands have gone to the village to celebrate the happiness of their master and mistress. From time to time the wind, heavy with a mist which feels almost like rain, comes to damp our faces, and brings us the remote phrases of a piano. Out there, in the closed house, some one is playing. I stopped a moment to listen in silence. It is at first like a trembling voice which, from afar, scarcely dares to sing its joy . . . It is like the laughter of a little girl who, in her room, fetches all her toys out and displays them to her sweetheart . . . It also brings to my mind the shy pleasure of a woman who, having gone to put on a beautiful dress, comes back to show it and is not yet sure it will please . . . This air which I do not know is also a prayer, an entreaty to happiness not to be too cruel, a bowing of the head and as it were a falling on the knees before happiness . . .

And this hint of fantasy in the language, the odd angle at which the images force reality to enter, are no less to the point than the repeated suggestion of a presence that transcends words in the sentences that diminish and trail off into silence.

> And I have often thought of it since.

> He had fallen asleep again . . . But next time he swore he would get up. To-morrow morning, perhaps! . . .

> My name? . . . I am Mademoiselle Yvonne de Galais . . .

But if it is providence that transforms Meaulnes' simple desire for an afternoon adventure into a mission, if it is a power benevolent and divine that guides him to the land promised in a vision, one must think again about his failure, and account for the evil in *Le Grand Meaulnes,* the evil that kills Yvonne, reduces Meaulnes to despair and leaves Seurel troubled and unhappy. In Fournier's world the balance is not tipped by the sentimentality of the early Gide or restored by the optimism of Jammes. The hero's search is repeatedly arrested at points where success seems most certain, the vision torments more than it consoles him, and the outcome is not rest but resignation to perpetual striving. A seventeenth-century divine contemplating an almost identical problem answers, "The things of God which we handle are divine, but our manner of handling them is human. There is little we touch but we leave the print of our fingers behind." When I first read these lines I was struck by what I thought of as their applicability to *Le Grand Meaulnes.* I am no longer so sure.

For what they postulate is a tragic flaw in human beings that

makes salvation impossible without an addition of grace, or, if you will, they presuppose original sin. That there is evil in Meaulnes' world, and of a human sort, is unquestionable. One need only look at Delouche with his face already old and his vulgar tales of women. If Frantz lives with a vision, untouched by experience, Delouche moves through experience without vision. And Delouche's role in the tragic outcome of the story is certainly ironic. For as it turns out, he knew all along of the forsaken manor and garrulously recalls seeing there a tombstone in which the words were carved: "Here lies Sir Galois, Knight, Faithful to His God, His King and His Love." Had Meaulnes confided in him he could easily, it would appear, have found the path to his happiness, and found it before Frantz de Galais appeared to claim his legitimate right. But could "le grand Meaulnes" have confided in Delouche? And is pride his sin?

I think not. Meaulnes could not confide in anyone. His communication even to Seurel, his sympathetic companion and disciple, was reluctant and severely limited. Meaulnes' silence was not a mere perversion. It was an inescapable consequence of his experience. An experience so profoundly personal as to be almost mystical. How could he put into words the strange feeling of contentment that urged him on, the intoxicating peace attending the sight of his goal? Meaulnes hardly knew himself where he had been, what he had done. "Does he suppose we do not know where he's been?" Delouche taunts. "Imbecile! I don't know myself," replies Meaulnes, in the immediate silence. All he knows is what he has felt, what he desires, and what he experiences still in his memory. Where could he find words to translate an experience so inward, so unique, so profoundly inexplicable? And who would understand?

The entire structure of the book is designed to reveal Meaulnes' silence. It is not Meaulnes who tells the story, who would have no need to, but Seurel, made dependent on sympathetic experience by a physical infirmity, who comes just close enough to Meaulnes' adventure to know of it and remains just distant enough to be able to relate it. And even as he relates it Fournier allows us the exquisite awareness that Seurel does not yet understand the full implications of what he is telling, so mysterious is the adventure still, and so troubling. But Seurel can only tell of those few incidents in Meaulnes' life that he shared with him or that the distraught boy found words to tell him about at midnight in the attic room they shared. Parts of the narrative are presented in the form of Meaulnes' journal, a broken

effort to inform himself, or in a few letters to Seurel, that are themselves laced with silences, and must be pieced together and supplemented by Seurel's own conjectures. But not interpreted. When the narrative is in Meaulnes' words it repeatedly breaks down; no symbols are private enough to represent his mysterious encounter. Fournier permits you to observe the silences themselves, and they are eloquent enough.

How could Meaulnes, then, have confided in Delouche? It would have been as fruitful as describing a vision of heaven to the damned. Seurel at one point attempts it in a chapter Fournier calls "Je Trahis . . ." Following Meaulnes' departure for Paris, presumably forever, Seurel, prompted by boredom, relief from the tension of Meaulnes' presence and a desire to be part of his new group of friends, attempts to communicate to Delouche and Boujardon Meaulnes' strange adventure. "Am I telling this story badly? It does not produce the effect which I was expecting." They are not impressed by such trifles. "Only a wedding!" And Seurel, for a moment, almost agrees with them. But only for a moment. Remorse gradually engulfs him, the evening seems deprived of all consolations, and in the night he imagines he hears Meaulnes turning over in his bed and listens for his light steps, "of the hunter upon the watch, in the dim distance of the lumber rooms . . ."

The evil in the relationship between Meaulnes and Delouche can not be attributed to Meaulnes' "human manner of handling the things of God." Meaulnes, wary and silent, instinctively protects the relics of his vision. The problem of evil in *Le Grand Meaulnes* is more subtle and elusive than the contrary diligence of enemies, the brutality of fate, or a tragic flaw in the hero.

The tragic failure of the hero to fulfill his mission involves a conflict that is not even sufficiently clear-cut to be called "a problem of evil." The failure of Meaulnes' mission is inherent in its definition. For the goal of Meaulnes' desires is a memory, a memory at once complete, intense . . . and irrecoverable. At the country outing, when Meaulnes and Yvonne de Galais meet for the second time the girl says,

> Could Frantz come back—if he is not dead—and find again his friends and his fiancée, and the interrupted wedding take place —then perhaps everything would be as of old! But can the past come to life again?

Of course it cannot. But in another sense, the past never dies. Meaulnes' acceptance of the present is dictated by his desires for the future;

his desires for the future are identical with his memory of the past. But the time that is measured, not by men's souls, but by the change of seasons and mutations of landscape is, in the world as Fournier understood it, an irreversible process moving in a definite direction. There can be no return for Meaulnes, either to his memory . . . or from it.

The tragedy of Meaulnes' failure is not merely the pathos of mutability. It is a tragedy of a mission doomed by its very conception. It is not simply marriage to Yvonne that lies at the end of his search. It is the attainment to that felicity of which Yvonne de Galais is both part and symbol. Meaulnes' memory remains absolute. Yvonne does not change in time. And for Meaulnes, these are sufficient for the desperate hope that nothing need have changed, the belief that he can recapture the experience at the festival. It was a festival honoring a marriage, attended by happy families of people pure in heart. Meaulnes says of them:

> If you have ever done something unpardonable you sometimes think, in the midst of much bitterness: "Yet there are people in the world who would forgive me." You imagine old people, indulgent grandparents, who are, beforehand, certain that all you do is well done. Undoubtedly the guests in the hall had been chosen from good folk of that kind; the rest were young people and children.

The festival is the most vivid representation of "society" we are shown in *Le Grand Meaulnes*. The guests are elegantly dressed in extravagant costumes and the events, planned by the children, are spontaneous and full of joy. Only an icy wind comes to remind the guests that it is December, like the suggestion in a Watteau landscape that the feasting and dancing will not go on forever. The second outing at which Meaulnes and Yvonne meet is a wry echo of the first. Everything has been planned in advance for the happiness of the participants, and all goes wrong. Now the palette is reversed and happiness is sensed as something tenuous and distantly remembered. But having once seen perfection Meaulnes is thrown into despair by anything less. We see this despair bursting forth into violence in his treatment of Valentine. What he comes to understand of his search through his alliance with her is at the expense of his innocence as it is, it would seem, with all human knowledge and love. We see despair again in his cruelty to Yvonne in his ceaseless questions harking back to the irretrievable past on the day that in tears he asked her to be his wife.

And perhaps it was, after all, a sinful hope, this panic wish by which Meaulnes is driven. He promises himself, knowing better, a heaven on earth. He begins his search in complete innocence of heart, and is filled with a "deep joy of having at last run away without premeditation." But in his conscious, deliberate attempts to regain his paradise he becomes unwilling to accept anything but the past come to life again.

> . . . invariably, with an obstinacy, of which he must have been aware, Meaulnes would return to the marvels of the old days. And each time the poor tortured girl had to repeat to him that everything was gone . . .

He asks about the children, the boats, the ponies, the tall looking glass, the old broken lute,

> . . . He inquired about all this with unwonted eagerness, as if he wanted to convince himself that nothing survived of his fine adventure, and that the girl would not bring back to him one piece of wreckage which could prove that they had not both lived in a dream—as the diver brings up from the bottom of the sea mere pebbles and seaweed . . .

The result is not only cruelty to Valentine and death to Yvonne, but violence to his own will. He loses his pilgrim spirit.

It is not only the beatific vision that Meaulnes cannot recover. He cannot even return to the kind of life that those who have never experienced any such vision can enjoy. "How could a man, who had leapt at one bound into Paradise, get used to living like everybody else?" He has passed through a privileged crisis, a tragic figure, at last aware of a sin that he could not avoid, being embedded in the nature of his experience, and resigned, as he says to Seurel, that

> . . . when I discovered the nameless manor, I was at the height of what stands for perfection and pure motive in any one's heart, a height I shall never reach again. In death alone, as I once wrote to you, I may hope to find again the beauty of that day . . .

The tragic experience is thus transformed—one is aware of it in the last letters of Fournier as well as in his novel—with hope of joy in the next. "Et ici commence l'aventure la plus belle de toutes," Fournier concluded his *Scenario du Grand Meaulnes.* Out of the materials he found at hand, but like Seurel, knowing well what he said, he had made at last the triumph he had predicted.

DONALD FINKEL:

Drinking Song

For all those who travel in droves
Down Rhone or Rhine, between harsh
Alp and secret Pyrenees,
For all those who thumb the soft
French shore of the world, where
It is hard to know whether the beach
Slides into the sea, or sea laps
Shore, eliding blue over the smooth
Stones, smoothed by eliding tongue,
The soft Française of sleep—for all
Those mothered by the sun, kissed
Or calmed by boys on bicycles; arms,
Arms entwining, in the beer-hall of baritone
Love:

the final war marks
Time in the mountains, confused because
You are unconfused, afraid because
You have no fear, sobbing
In the wash of your laughter, which smooths
The harsh Alp of the mind, and nudges
Apart the teeth of the Pyrenees.

Dust on an Apple

And tell us this, maestro: when the maid,
After she has bitten the apple, puts it back
Into her apron pocket, the same in which
She has already jammed the dustcloth, does she tweak
Our waxed moustaches, or is it that we grow
Small in the majesty of disease, that we sulk
In our bright apartments, in the flood

Of our shadowless sunlight, that we feel
The loss once again of our innocence, and the loss
Of the dusty apple?

Does she call
Us to the tree, as once she did;
Do we refuse this time, now that we lack
The innocence she stole; now that we know
The contents of the box, do we hang back?
And tell us this, maestro: is there much
We have forgotten, is it all there in your book,
The taste, the dust and all, for which we paid
So dear?

For now in her ignorance she takes
A thousand evils in her mouth, yet each
New mouthful gathers redder at her cheek
As, whiter and smaller, the beckoning apple grows
Safe in her hunger, pure in her vacant look,
Until the harmless core is bled,
And carelessly she lets it fall,
And with her cloth turns once more to caress
The antiseptic chambers of our loss.

MAXINE W. KUMIN:

Gardner Museum, Boston

Three times and places Sargent painted her,
The hair cropped, the high-placed bones shimmering
Through the skin, and the hands nervous, demanding.
That time in Venice, spanning the casement frame
With all the demon light diffused behind her,
She named him citizen in her strict country.

They say when Isabella Gardner felt
Neglect or pique or other froward passion
She'd sit along a ledge a hundred feet
Above her doge's garden, forbidding, brooding
And wait to be discovered. She loved a fuss:
Madam, the architect raged, you do not need
An architect. Foremen swore and left.
Gossips fattened. Isabella, high
On a ladder, marbleized the concrete wall
While the workmen wrung their hands below for Madam.

She was diamond hard and sure, the stuff
Museums are made of. Everything endures:
The buttressed will, supportable forever
By bankers and solid sons, the leather room,
The magpie loves she packed home from abroad
All in authentic jumble—the garden best
Of all, being permitted to grow, being
Renewed quarterly, a cloister out of time
Steam chamber moistened and fertilized. It takes
Ten months to stretch nasturtiums so that they
Can drop their orange cups a storey deep.
The main thing is not to let them die back,
To disregard their time to go to seed.

That was the grip on life she had, the wide
Underlip, the ordaining jaw fastened on
Main things, hard about dying. Sargent stayed
To the last of her swathed in white, paralyzed,
And no one saw that useless side, those shadows
Were so cold the day turned blue and white.

They breathe so many fables of her here
Where Sargent's likenesses still hang in poor light
And the same faithful guards murmur to visitors;
Fables enough to choose from long after
Furniture turns worm wood, leather crumbles,
Arrogance dies and leaves to wonder at
A heavy epitaph, baroque in disrepute
And Sundays, sober folk for musicales.

GRACE PALEY:

The Contest

Up early or late, it never matters, the day gets away from me. Summer or winter, the shade of trees or their hard shadow, I never get into my rice krispies till noon.

I am ambitious, but it's a long-range thing with me. I have my confidential sights on a star, but there's half a lifetime to get to it. Meanwhile I keep my eyes open and am well dressed.

I told the examining psychiatrist for the army: yes I like girls. And I do. Not my sister—a pimp's dream. But girls, slim and tender or really stacked, dark brown at their centers, smeared by time. Not my mother, who should've stayed in Freud. I *have* got a sense of humor.

My last girl was Jewish, which is often a warm kind of girl, concerned about food intake and employability. They don't like you to work too hard, I understand, until you're hooked—and then, you bastard, sweat!

A medium girl, size 12, a clay pot with handles—she could be grasped. I met her in the rain outside some cultural activity at Cooper Union or Washington Irving High School. She had no umbrella and I did, so I walked her home to my house. There she remained for several hours, a yawning cavity, half asleep. The rain rained on the ailanthus tree outside my window, the wind rattled the shutters, and I took my time making coffee and carving an ounce of pound cake. I don't believe in force and I would have waited, but her loneliness was very great.

We had quite a nice time for a few weeks. She brought rolls and bagels from wherever the stuff can still be requisitioned. On Sundays she'd come out of Brooklyn with a chicken to roast. She thought I was too skinny. I am, but girls like it. If you're fat, they can see immediately that you'll never need their unique talent for warmth.

Spring came. She said: "Where are we going?" Those were her words! Now I have met this attitude before. Apparently, for most women, fun for all is too much of a good thing.

The sun absorbed July and she said it again. "Freddy, if we're not going anywhere, I'm not going along any more." We were beach-driven those windy Sundays: her mother must have told her what to say. She said it with such imprisoned conviction.

One Friday night in September, I came home from an unlucky party. All the faces had been strange. There were no extra girls, and after some muted conversation with the glorious properties of other men, I felt terrible and went home.

In an armchair, looking at an *Art News* full of Dutchmen who had lived eighty years in forty, was Dorothy. And by her side, an overnight case. I could hardly see her face when she stood to greet me, but she made tea first and steamed some of my ardor into the damp night.

"Listen Freddy," she said, "I told my mother I was visiting Leona in Washington for two days and I fixed it with Leona. Everyone'll cover me,"—pouring tea and producing seeded tarts from some secret Flatbush Avenue bakery—all this to change the course of a man's appetite and enable conversation to go forward.

"No, listen Freddy, you don't take yourself seriously and that's the reason you can't take anything else—a job, or a—a relationship seriously. Freddy, you don't listen, you'll laugh, but you're very barbaric. You live at your nerve ends. If you're near a radio, you listen to music, if you're near an open icebox, you stuff yourself; if a girl is within ten feet of you, you have her stripped and on the spit."

"Now Dotty, don't be so graphic," I said. "Every man is his own rotisserie."

What a nice girl! Say something vulgar and she'd suddenly be all over me, blushing bitterly, glad that the East River separated her from her mother. Poor girl, she was avid.

And she was giving. By Sunday night, I had ended half a dozen conversations and nipped their moral judgments at the homiletic root. By Sunday night I had said, I love you Dotty, twice. By Monday morning I realized the extent of my commitment, and I don't mind saying it prevented my going to a job I had swung on Friday.

My impression of women is that they mean well, but are driven to an obsessive end by greedy tradition. When Dot found out that I'd decided against that job (what job? a job, that's all), she took action. She returned my copy of *1984* and said in a note that I could keep the six wine glasses her mother had lent me.

Well, I did miss her; you don't meet such wide-open kindness every day. She was no fool either. I'd say peasant wisdom is what she had. Not too much education. Her hair was long and dark. I had always seen it in neat little coiffures or reparably disarrayed until that weekend.

It was staggering.

I missed her. And then I didn't have too much luck after that. Very little money to spend, and girls are primordial with intuition. There was one nice little married girl whose husband was puttering around in another postal zone, but her heart wasn't in it. I got some windy copy to do through my brother-in-law, a clean-cut croupier who is always crackling bank notes at family parties. Things picked up.

Out of my gasbag profits one weekend, I was propelled into the Craggy-moor, a high-pressure resort, a star-studded haven with 1100 acres of golf course. When I returned, exhausted but modest, there she was, right in my parlor floor front. With a few gasping kind words and a modern gimmick, she hoped to breathe eternity into a mortal matter, love.

"Ah Dotty," I said, holding out my accepting arms. "I'm always glad to see you."

Of course, she explained, "I didn't come for that really, Freddy. I came to talk to you. We have a terrific chance to make some real money, if you'll only be serious a half hour. You're so clever, and you ought to direct yourself to something. God, you could live in the country. I mean even if you kept living alone, you could have a decent place on a decent street instead of this dump."

I kissed the tip of her nose. "If you want to be very serious, Dot, let's get out and walk. Come on, get your coat, and tell me all about how to make money."

She did. We walked out to the park and scattered autumn leaves for an hour. "Now don't laugh, Freddy," she told me. "There's a Yiddish paper called *Morgenlicht.* It's running a contest: JEWS IN THE NEWS. Every day they put in a picture and two descriptions. You have to say who the three people are, add one more fact about them and then send it in by midnight that night. It runs three months at least."

"A hundred Jews in the News?" I said. "What a tolerant country! So Dot, what do you get for this useful information?"

"First prize, $5,000 and a trip to Israel. Also on return two days each in the three largest European capitals in the Free West."

"Very nice," I said. "What's the idea, though—to uncover the ones that've been passing?"

"Freddy, why do you look at everything inside out? They're just proud of themselves and they want to make Jews everywhere proud of their contribution to this country. Aren't you proud?"

"Woe to the crown of pride!"

"I don't care what you think. The point is, we know somebody who knows somebody on the paper—he writes a special article once a week; we don't know him really, but our family name is familiar to him. So we have a very good chance if we really do it. Look how smart you are, Freddy. I can't do it myself, Freddy, you have to help me. It's a thing I made up my mind to do anyway. If Dotty Wasserman really makes up her mind, it's practically done."

I hadn't noticed this obstinacy in her character before. I had none in my own. Every week-day night after work, she leaned thoughtfully on my desk, wearing for warmth a Harris tweed jacket that ruined the nap of my arm. Somewhere out of doors a strand of copper in constant agitation carried information from her mother's Brooklyn phone to her ear.

Peering over her shoulder I would sometimes discover a three-quarter view of a newsworthy Jew or a full view of a half Jew. The fraction did not interfere with the rules. They were glad to extract him and be proud.

The longer we worked the prouder Dotty became. Her face flushed, she'd raise her head from the hieroglyphics and read her own translation:

> "A grey-headed gentleman very much respected;
> an intimate of cabinet members;
> a true friend to a couple of presidents;
> often seen in the park, sitting on a bench."

"Bernard Baruch!" I snapped.

And then a hard one:

> "Has contributed to the easiness of interstate commerce; his creation is worth millions and was completed last year; still he has time for Deborah, Susan, Judith and Nancy, his four daughters."

For this I smoked and guzzled a hot eggnog Dot had whipped up to give me strength and girth. I stared at the stove, the ceiling, my irritable shutters—then I said calmly: "Chaim Pazzi,—he's a bridge architect."

I never forget a name, no matter what type-face it appears in.

"Imagine it, Freddy, I didn't even know there was a Jew who had such an accomplishment in that field."

Actually, it sometimes took as much as an hour to attach a real name to a list of exaggerated attributes. When it took that long I couldn't help muttering, "Well, we've uncovered another one. Put him on the list for Van 2."

Dotty'd say sadly, "I have to believe you're joking."

Well, why do you think she liked me? All you little psychoanalyzed people, now say it at once, in a chorus: "Because she is a masochist and you are a sadist."

No. I was very good to her. And to all the love she gave me, I responded. And I kept all our appointments and called her on Fridays to remind her about Saturday, and when I had money I brought her flowers and once earrings, and once a black brassiere I saw advertised in the paper with some cleverly stitched windows for ventilation. I still have it. She never dared take it home.

But I will not be eaten by any woman.

My poor old mother died with a sizable chunk of me stuck in her gullet. I was in the army at the time, but I understand her last words were: "Introduce Freddy to Eleanor Farbstein." Consider the nerve of that woman. Including me in a codicil. She left my sister to that ad man and culinary expert with a crew cut. She left my father to the commiseration of aunts, while me, her prize possession and the best piece of meat in the freezer of her heart, she left to Eleanor Farbstein.

As a matter of fact, Dotty said it herself. "I never went with a fellow who paid as much attention as you, Freddy. You're always there. I know if I'm lonesome or depressed all I have to do is call you and you'll meet me downtown and drop whatever you're doing. Don't think I don't appreciate it."

The established truth is, I wasn't doing much. My brother-in-law could have kept me in clover, but he pretended I was a specialist in certain ornate copy infrequently called for by his concern.

Therefore I was able to give my wit, energy and attention to JEWS IN THE NEWS—*Morgenlicht,* the Morning Paper that Comes Out the Night Before.

And so we reached the end. Dot really believed we'd win. I was almost persuaded. Drinking hot chocolate and screwdrivers, we fantasied six weeks away.

We won.

I received a 9:00 A.M. phone call one mid-week morning. "Rise and shine, Frederick P. Sims. We did it. You see, whatever you really try to do, you can do."

She quit work at noon and, full of smiles and corrupt with pride, met me for lunch at an outdoor cafe in the Village. We ate very well and I had to hear the following information—part of it I'd suspected.

It was all in her name. Of course her mother had to get some. She had helped with the translation because Dotty had very little Yiddish actually—not to mention her worry about the security of her old age. And it was necessary, they had decided in a midnight conference, to send some money to their old Aunt Lise, who had gotten out of Europe only ninety minutes before it was sealed forever and was now in Toronto among strangers, having lost most of her mind.

The trip abroad to Israel and three European capitals was for two (2). They had to be married. If our papers could not include one that proved our conjunction by law, she would sail alone. Before I could make my accumulating statement, she shrieked oh! her mother was waiting in front of Lord and Taylor's. And she was off.

I smoked my miserable encrusted pipe and considered my position.

Meanwhile in another part of the city wheels were moving, presses humming, and the next day the facts were composed from right to left across the masthead of *Morgenlicht*:

! SNIW NAMRESSAW YTTOD
SREWSNA EHT LLA SWONK LRIG NYLKOORB

Neatly boxed below, a picture of Dot and ME eating lunch recalled a bright flash that had illuminated the rice pudding the day before, as I sat drenched in the fizzle of my modest hopes.

I sent Dotty a postcard. It said: "No can do."

The final arrangements were complicated due to the reluctance of the Israeli government to permit egress to dollar bills which were making the grandest tour of all. Once inside that province of cosmopolitans, the dollar was expected to resign its hedonistic role as an American toy and begin the presbyterian life of a tool.

Within two weeks letters came from abroad bearing this information and containing photographs of Dotty smiling at a Kibbutz, leaning sympathetically on a wailing wall, unctuous in an orange grove.

I decided to take a permanent job for a couple of months in an agency, attaching the following copy to photographs of upright men!

THIS IS BILL FEARY. HE IS THE MAN WHO WILL TAKE YOUR ORDER FOR____TONS OF RED LABEL FERTILIZER.

HE KNOWS THE MIDWEST. HE KNOWS YOUR NEEDS. CALL HIM BILL AND CALL HIM NOW.

I was neat and brown-eyed, innocent and alert, offended by the chicanery of my fellows, powered by decency, going straight up.

While I labored at my dreams, Dotty spent some money to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa and ride in a gondola. She decided to stay in London at least two weeks because she felt at home there. And so all this profit was at last being left in the hands of foreigners who would invest it to their own advantage.

One misty day, the boom of foghorns rolling round Manhattan Island reminded me of a telegram I had determined to ignore. ARRIVING QUEEN ELIZABETH WEDNESDAY 4 P.M. I ignored it successfully all day, and was casual with a couple of cool blondes. And went home and was lonely. I was lonely all evening. I tried writing a letter to an athletic girl I'd met in a ski lodge a few weeks before. I thought of calling some friends, but the pure unmentionable fact is that women isolate you. There was no one to call.

I went out for an evening paper. Read it. Listened to the radio . . . Went out for a morning paper. Had a beer. Read the paper and waited for the calculation of morning.

I never went to work the next day, or the day after. No word came from Dot. She must have been crawling with guilt. Poor girl . . .

I finally wrote her a letter. It was very strong.

> My dear Dorothy:
>
> When I consider our relationship and recall its seasons, the summer sun that shone on it and the winter snows it ploughed through, I can still find no reason for your unconscionable behavior. I realize that you were motivated by the hideous examples of your mother and all the mothers before her. You were, in a word, a prostitute. The love and friendship I gave you were apparently not enough. What did you want? You gave me the swamp waters of your affection to drown in and because I refused you planned this desperate revenge.
>
> In all earnestness, I helped you, combing my memory for those of our faith who have touched the press-happy nerves of this nation.
>
> What did you want?
>
> Marriage?
>
> Ah, that's it! A happy daddy and mommy home. The home-happy day you could put your hair up in curlers, swab cream in the corner of your eyes . . . I'm not sure all this is for Fred.
>
> I am 29 years old and not getting any younger. All around

me, boy graduates have attached their bow-legs to the Ladder of Success. Dotty Wasserman, what can I say to you? If you think I have been harsh, face the fact that you haven't dared face me.

We had some wonderful times together. We could have them again. This is a great opportunity to start on a more human basis. You cannot impose your narrow view of life on me. Make up your mind, Dotty Wasserman.

Sincerely with recollected affection,
F.

P.S. This is your *last* chance.

Two weeks later I received a one-hundred-dollar bill.

A week after that, at my door, I found a carefully packed leather portfolio, handsewn in Italy, and a projector with a box of slides showing interesting views of Europe and North Africa.

And after that nothing at all.

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